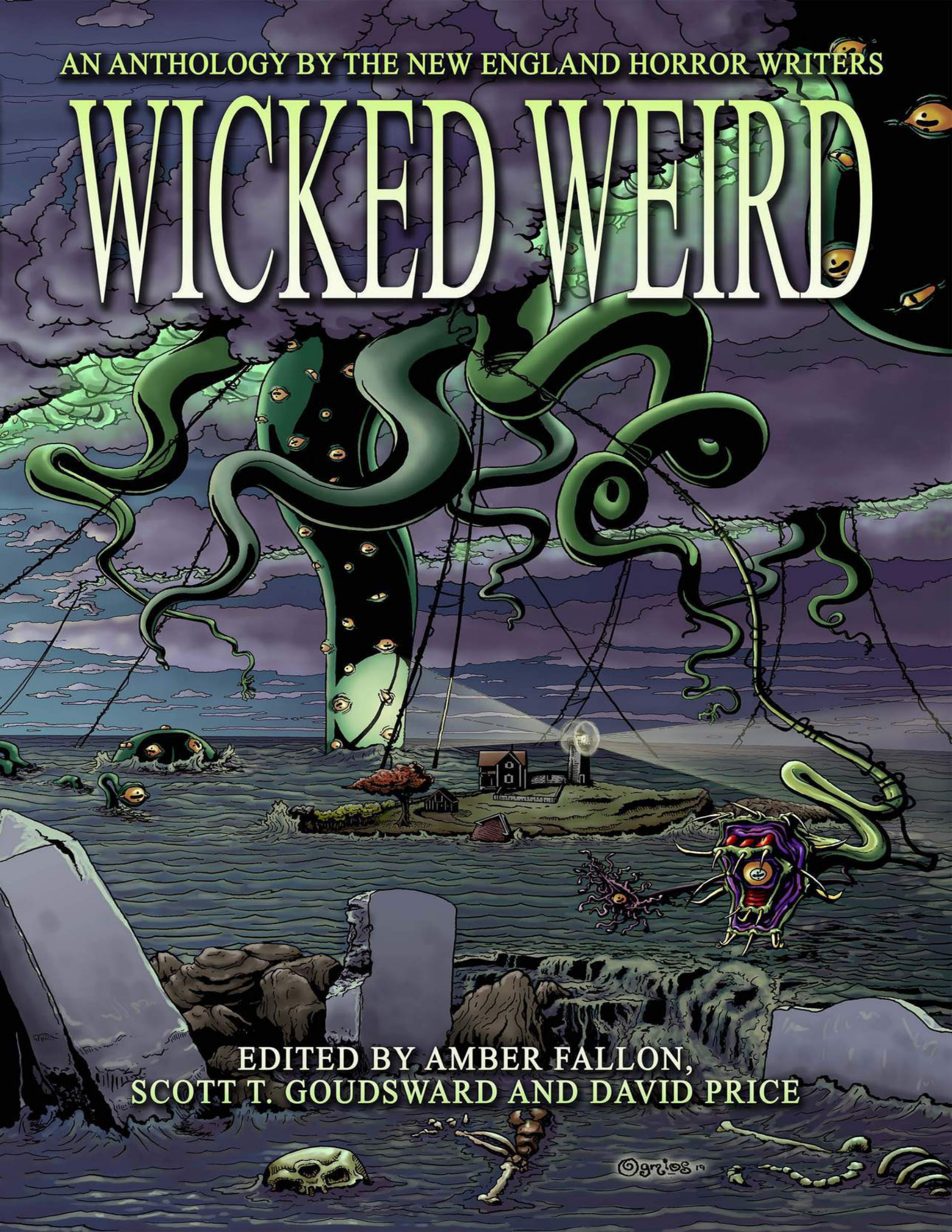
AN ANTHOLOGY BY THE NEW ENGLAND HORROR WRITERS

WICKED WEIRD



EDITED BY AMBER FALLON,
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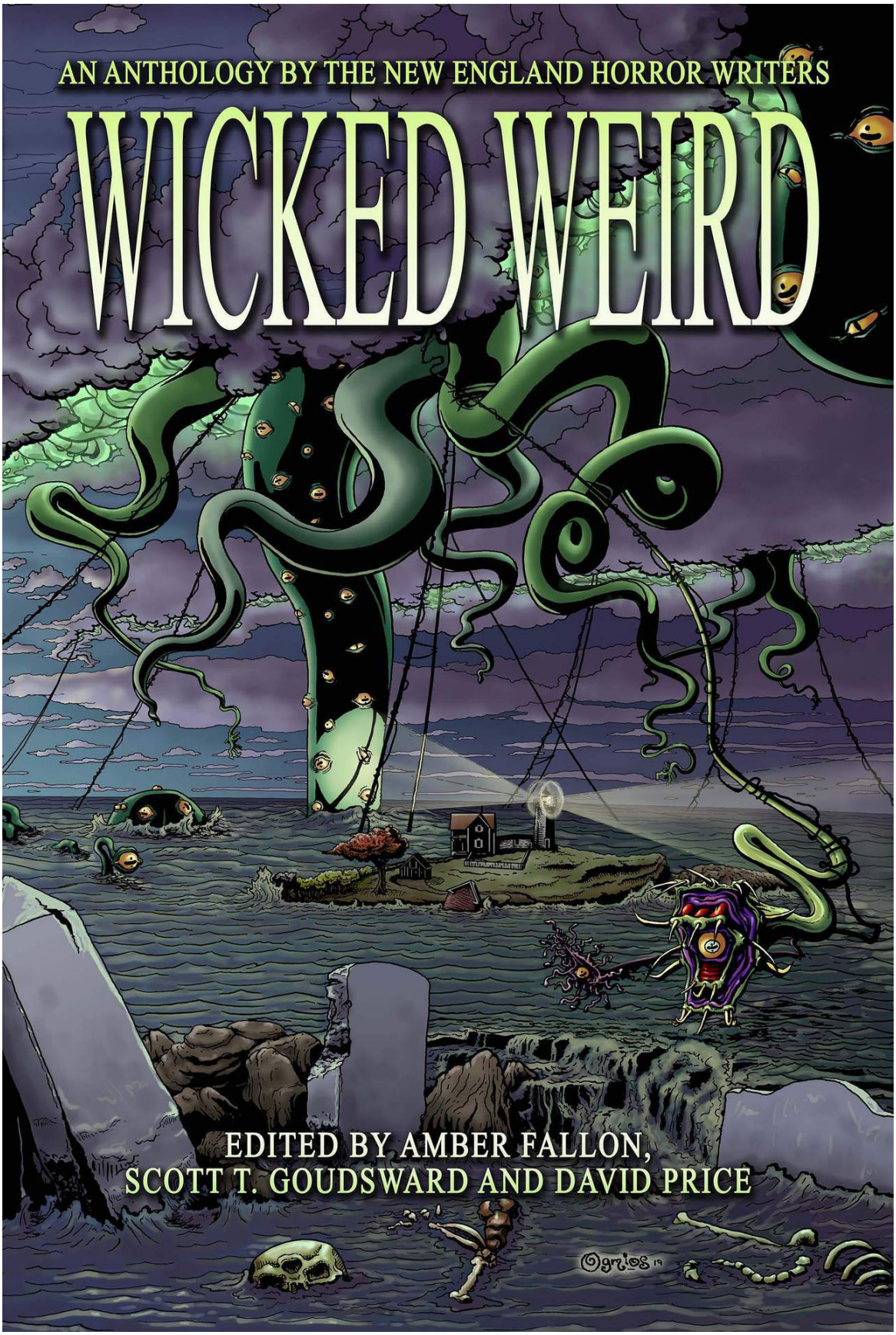
AN ANTHOLOGY BY THE NEW ENGLAND HORROR WRITERS
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Wicked Weird

An Anthology of the New England Horror Writers

Edited by

Amber Fallon

Scott T. Goudsward

David Price

Maine - New Hampshire - Vermont - Massachusetts - Rhode Island - Connecticut

www.newenglandhorror.org

In Loving Memory of
Dallas Mayr
and
Frank Michaels Errington

Those beneath, devour.
by Victoria Dalpe

It happened.

“Holy Shit.” Greg whispered. His hand was up at his mouth. His eyes were wide. His face had gone an unnatural white.

I didn’t need to say anything, his face was saying it for me, for all of us. My stomach flipped and I nearly barfed right there. Instead, I breathed shallowly as I could. In through my nose, out through my mouth. Breathe in the stench of burning flesh. Breathe out panic. Breathe in the rotten egg stink of sulphur. Breathe out panic. Breathe in the sweet smell of rot. Breathe out panic.

“What happens now? I mean this was all Georgie’s idea. What happens now, what was *supposed* to happen even?” This was Deena. Her voice was shrill. She had her arms wrapped tight around herself and was trembling. Normally, Deena was nearly unflappable; she was clearly flapped by all this.

This is real and this is bad , was all I could think.

“Did it work though? Did she get what she wanted?” This was Greg, eyes red-rimmed, staring at the scorched hole in the floor. None of us were brave enough to go to the edge and look down.

“It didn’t work, and she is fucking dead!” Deena shouted. I caught myself shushing her, then felt like an idiot. Considering all the noise and goings on of the last hour, I don’t know why Deena yelling would call attention. Good chance people were actually fleeing from the library, not running toward it.

“She’s not dead. She can’t be,” Greg said, swiping at his cheeks. Greg loved Georgie, she’d never reciprocated per se, too busy with her studies and her obsessions, and all the guys that were more handsome than Greg.

I’d asked her many times why she couldn’t throw him a bone, and go out for coffee or a glass of wine or something.

On my most recent attempt, she’d sniffed and rolled her eyes. “C’mon Carmen, he’s a geek. He’s my friend sure, but that’s as far as it will ever

go. And you can tell him that; I've tried a thousand times, maybe you'll have luck getting into that thick skull." Had it really only been two days since she'd said that?

"I'm going to be in so much trouble over this. I can't believe I bought into Georgie's bullshit!" Said Deena, sitting heavy on a fold out chair, staring into the hole. The hole was in solid, or once solid cement, bored through from below by heat and other things able to dissolve concrete.

I covered my eyes, not wanting to look at the hole, or my so-called friends, or think about Georgie's face in those last moments, the switch from excitement to… what had that emotion been? Utter, abject terror, probably.

Then… in that last second when her eyes went wide… and met mine…

…I folded over and my puke splashed down between my knees into a stinking, steaming puddle. The Chinese food a vile reminder that a few hours ago, all had been normal and we'd just been a group of friends eating at MoonStar Cafe, as we had weekly since Georgie had assembled us for her little side project. Georgie and I split the last dumpling. And now there it was, glistening, half-digested in a puddle of bile.

I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and stood, knowing that there was no point bickering or standing around any longer. Deena would continue to bitch and worry about her scholarship, as she had every single week since Georgie conned her to come out to eat with us. And Greg would sob and defend Georgie till the end, as he always did. We had to clean things up, and we had to get out of here, because Deena was right, someone would be by eventually. I told them all this, stepping over my barf with new resolve and a freshly empty stomach. I approached the hole.

The cement was scorched black and crumbling around the edges, the entire molecular surface seemed compromised and almost crackly as my weight pressed on it. I prayed I didn't fall in as well, all too familiar with the sensation of ice breaking underfoot.

A memory ripped its way up and into my mind. Me at age 12. Ice skating on a lake not totally frozen, watching my best friend Teri plunge through it. One minute there, the next gone. I remembered dropping to my hands and knees, fighting the urge to flee to safety, to where the other kids were screaming in terror. Instead, carefully, carefully, I moved along the ever-thinning ice, trying to be lighter than a feather. Get to the hole, reach

in, try to find her and pull her out. All the while fissures in the surface spread out around me. You know what death sounds like? It sounds like ice cracking.

Back in the basement, back in the now, I reached the mouth of the hole and cautiously peered in. It was blacker inside, so deep we could drop a flare and it would probably fall for miles and miles. And at the very edge of the hole, drifting on the foul breeze coming up from below, a hunk of blonde hair attached to a sizeable chunk of bloody scalp. Georgie's hair. Georgie's scalp.

I looked away fast, fist to my mouth. I could feel Deena and Greg watching me from the corners of the room. But no one spoke. My eyes landed on the book, dropped in all the madness. I wished she'd never opened it, never got ideas about it, never talked Deena into sneaking it out of its case. Never pushed her tits up and flirted her way into Greg translating it for her. Never duped me because I believed in her, believed she could do what she claimed, because we were best friends and roommates. Because I'd never had a friend as pretty and interesting as Georgie.

Without meaning to, my attention went back to her hair, clinging like scrub to a cliffside, still unable to process that her spell had *worked* , and she was dead and gone, and we were left to clean it up. I knelt, keeping my eyes on the hole, and picked up the old book. I hated the feel of its leather-bound cover, knowing that it was skin, and I was tempted to toss it into the hole. It was vile. Words like vile and evil seemed dramatic and flowery, but there was a wrongness about the stinky old text and the sooner I could hand it off to Deena, the better.

Had it really only been a month since Georgie got us all together to pitch her scheme? I got to the restaurant and saw her sitting with a girl I'd never met, but recognized, as someone who worked in the library. And on Georgie's other side, the ever-doting Greg, a nice enough guy but only a few degrees from a stalker in my mind. And I made four. Her little team, assembled and sworn to secrecy, so that Georgie could play magician.

The book was kept locked up, not to be removed from its protective case without express permission from the university, which it would never grant undergrads, and unlike Georgie, the rest of us were on some sort of scholarship and didn't want to risk expulsion. We'd told her all this when she conceived of her scheme to steal ("borrow") the book. Deena had the

most objections, which made sense as she was employed by the college as a library assistant. Hence the only one with access to the book, and would therefore be the first person they'd accuse. Georgie insisted we were all paranoid but promised that no one would get in trouble. And we believed her.

So, we, the remaining three, looked at each other and the situation and decided we wouldn't tell. I didn't love hiding what happened, or that Georgie's death would be our horrible secret. But it was her plan, and her folly, and it was unfair we would all be brought down because of it. She'd promised we'd be okay. It's what she would want, or that's what we told ourselves. But I could already picture her haunted parents, and her little brother, Brice. Never getting any closure. And no one would ever know the truth. Save us.

The library's basement was a hoarder's paradise: boxes atop boxes, whole storerooms of furniture and bric-a-brac. We laid a large piece of plywood we found in the maintenance closet over the hole, and a moldy threadbare carpet went over that. On top of that, we carefully moved a banged-up reference desk and some chairs. We even took the time to lay out books on it, as if someone had been sorting through boxes on the table, looking for something.

The ceiling was scorched, and we could do little about that, except hope no one looked up. Deena cracked an ancient window open a few inches to air out the singed smell.

When the space looked no more suspicious than any other space in the dusty old library, we packed up, cleaned our sooty selves in the bathroom, returned the book to its locked case, and snuck out, promising to check in with each other the next morning.

"You okay to go back to your room alone?" Greg asked, once Deena was out of earshot. She lived across campus in one of the newer dormitories, Akeley. Georgie and I lived in Mason Hall. Greg lived off campus with his parents. "I could walk you, if you'd like." He was so pitiful-looking that I almost took him up on it, but in the end told him no. I needed to be with my thoughts. Besides, I told him, he was parked in the visitor lot and would have to walk all the way back for his car. He reluctantly agreed and after an awkward and impulsive hug, he went on his way, leaving me standing alone in the quad.

It was late and utterly silent, the grass twinkled with early morning dew and the air smelled of spring and rain. Georgie just that morning had opened our dorm windows and talked about getting some tulips. “To celebrate spring finally coming after a long and horrible winter!”

I fought the urge to cry and instead jammed my hands in my pockets and hastened my pace, not liking how vulnerable I felt out in the open all alone. The only sound was the echo of my boots on the sidewalk, the only company my extended, distorted shadow along the groomed lawns just starting to return to green. I kept glancing behind me, sensing that someone was watching me, *something* . And it could be, that was the crazy part. I was now part of a select group that knew without a doubt that there were things out there, under the ground, anywhere they wanted, beyond the realm of what we knew.

“You dumb bitch.” I growled, my grief shaping itself into anger. Why did she always want *everything* ? She was smart, brilliant even, beautiful, and rich. Everyone liked her; she charmed professors and students alike. Why couldn’t that have been enough? Why did she have to want more, when so many would be happy with half of what she had. Hell, I’d have been happy with a quarter.

The wind picked up out of nowhere, and every blade of grass and leaf fluttering made me jump. I was running before I knew it, the staccato clack of my boots keeping time with my heartbeats.

When I finally, breathlessly, reached my dorm, it took a few tries to get my shaking hands and the key to cooperate. Inside, I locked the door and panted, back pressed to it, dreading the reality that I was going to a room that Georgie would never again inhabit.

The old hall was equal parts decay and charm, with cracked marble floors and elaborate moldings, little empty niches, and dusty rectangles on the walls where paintings once hung. My mother, practical to a fault, had sniffed at the place when she helped me move in, but I was charmed by the history, by thinking of the hundreds of students who had come before me. When I reached my room, a corner unit high up on the third floor, I was in love. There was an old mantle, tons of sun pouring in tall windows and in the center, a gorgeous blonde girl, who looked like a movie star. Georgie. She came right up and hugged me, welcomed me. I had felt like I was home.

Now, four years later, when the door swung in, it was to a dark messy room, colder and damper than the hall on account of the windows still being open. Georgie's bed was unmade, a few books left open, pages fluttering on the breeze.

I blinked back tears as I closed the heavy wooden windows, tried to ignore all her stuff, tried to ignore the entire day, and the sight of that thing that took her screaming.

Her last words, her eyes beseeching and terrified: "Carmen, help me!"

* * *

I remembered how cold the water was, so cold that it burned. I remembered my chin pressed to the craggy ice and reaching as far as I could under the ice, searching for her. I worried Teri had gone further down on a current and was trapped below the ice, like a horrible mime act, trying to find a place to come up for air. Like she was on the dark side of the looking glass, pounding on a mirror. But no, I felt something, not a fish, something with hands and hair. I grabbed hold for dear life, and hollered, and help was coming but then was called back, and slowly, slowly I pulled her up and she was so heavy, soaked and cold, and my arm screamed; I was just a scrawny little girl, but I was able to pull her up out of the water and keep pulling my limp and unresponsive friend, along the ice, and it was further cracking and breaking off behind us, and finally, we reached the snowy shore, my lungs on fire, my body on fire. I rolled onto my back and stared at the flat gray sky, I could hear others talking to her, reviving her, but I didn't bother to look, I was too tired.

But I couldn't save Georgie.

I shucked off my clothes, stinking of smoke as they did, and jammed them in the trash. I'd never get the smell out. I wanted to shower to get the stink out of my hair, brush the sour vomit taste out of my mouth, but the bathroom was all the way down the hall, and the idea of even walking down there alone terrified me.

So instead, I swished some tepid water from a glass by my nightstand and spit it into my trashcan and crawled into bed, bundling as tight as I could and wishing I still had my old teddy bear, which was packed up in an attic at my mom's house three states away.

I hunkered down, blanket over my head, just a mouth hole to breathe, and tried to sleep, prayed for the oblivion to come and scrub this day away.

But it wouldn’t. Instead, all I could see was Georgie’s face the moment when victory turned to horror, her hands reaching for me. “Carmen, help me!” And the force with which she was pulled down, her head striking the side. There one moment, gone the next. The worm god ate her and I puked up my dumpling.

“You must be curious, Carmen. Be honest.” I could hear Georgie’s voice in my ear, “You wouldn’t be helping me if you weren’t.”

“I’m helping because I want to see your stupid face when nothing happens.” I’d huffed and she had laughed until she snorted. “And I can’t wait to see *your* face when you look at the book I found.”

“Georgie come on, this isn’t a game. You know Deena could lose her job, hell, her scholarship, if you mess with those rare books.”

“Carmen, what if it’s true what they say?”

“That magic and monsters are real? C’mon, get out of the clouds. You have everything, and if that scary stuff is real, why would you want to know?!”

“*Because* . God, Carmen, you have no sense of adventure. Because it’s there! Because this can’t be all. There has to be more.”

“I like the world as it is, thank you.”

“You are boring, Carmen, I love you and you are my best friend, but you are boring. Never gonna get anywhere with that attitude.”

My pillow was wet with tears, *and look where you got with your attitude* , I thought to myself.

Did she die instantly? Did its viscous body melt her and burn her on contact? Hell, it dissolved the concrete, so it must have, right? When she was pulled it into its mouth, did it chew her? Or did she just travel down its length being slowly dissolved into soup?... also, was that even a mouth? Was she already worm poop smeared along some horrible tunnel deep below the ground further than anyone has ever gone?

The questions kept coming and coming.

I doubted that ugly thing thought about much, probably dumb as a post, just a big stomach most likely. A big hungry monster, oblivious to time, humanity, the sun, living its days away in the endless dark, surrounded by the perpetual press of earth, deaf and blind. Until some fool girl summons you up to eat her in the basement of a fucking library.

Why that thing? Was the question I would ask her if I could. She looked through hundreds of pages of that book, what was it about that one

that caught her eye? I'd never asked her what she thought it would do, because I didn't believe. Maybe if I had, or even just humored her a little more, none of this would be like it is now, maybe I could have talked her out of it all. But I thought it was a lark, a goof, a stupid game. The only risk was Deena losing her job.

Outside my blanket cave, I could hear birds chirping and noted the wall opposite me lightening.

Morning.

And with it would come other people's questions. First, there'd be Dylan, the handsomer-than-Greg sort-of boyfriend. Georgie had told him we were all going to study at the library till late. So that would be an issue.

And of course, her parents, doting and waspy, rich enough to hire private detectives when the police came up with nothing. There's no way I could lie effectively to them. I knew it. I've never been a good liar. But would they believe the truth? Subterranean monsters ate her.

… I found myself puking again… making it just in time to the trash.

I remembered when the ambulance arrived, Teri had on breathing apparatus, like a scuba diver, and she was wrapped in a blanket that looked like tin foil. They strapped her onto a gurney and lifted, her skin was bluish and eyes were closed as they passed me.

An EMT leaned over me, shining a light in my eyes. "You are a hero young lady, a real hero."

I don't believe in fate, or karmic balance, or any of that. But I couldn't help wonder, as I looked at Georgie's empty bed, a bed she would never sleep in again, if I had used up my chance to save a friend that snowy day in New Jersey.

Maybe Teri was fated to live, and maybe Georgie was fated to die.

And maybe I was fated to bear witness, and watch the thing from beneath emerge and devour, and know that they were down there. Always down there, waiting.

Big stomachs and big mouths.

* * *

Two months later I sat on a bench, watching a bunch of fools playing ultimate frisbee. It was impossible not to feel a little trill of fear watching

their bare feet in the grass, tromping on the ground… daring whatever was down there to come up.

Nothing came of the police investigation, or the college's inquest. They asked questions, we answered, and everyone moved on. Georgie's sad eyed parents hugged me as they packed up her things. Greg found a girlfriend and stopped calling, and then Deena transferred far away. And I was alone. And Georgie was just gone. It felt a bit like a waste to me, she had been so vivacious, so inspiring. But even she could be snuffed out like a candle flame, forgotten with the passage of time.

Leaving me alone. Sitting in the sunny quad, happy idiots all around me. Sky overhead, the ground and memories beneath. Georgie buried beneath.

And I was left to know things ordinary people just aren't meant to know.

A Strange Haze
by Matthew M. Bartlett

My former wife once told me that I collect dirty looks like some people collect rare coins. She said it with a tone of tired exasperation, but, having been freed from the confines of our marriage almost six years previous, she said it also with a hint of detached affection. Relieved more than detached, maybe. At any rate, she's a good woman, and a clever one, and what she says is true: It's likely that, consciously or unconsciously, I tend to say exactly the wrong thing, without fail, every time. Further, I frequently fail to moderate the volume of my voice; it's loud in the church pew and loud in the chophouse. I have a congenital inability to adjust the subject matter to suit the audience. And, worst of all, I am given to frequent, involuntary outbursts of insulting invective.

I should disabuse you of any notion that the above laundry list was in any way a part of the dissolution of our marriage. That is a very different matter indeed, and a private matter, which I will discuss with only a very few people, and you're not one of them. I will say this: those who might disparage her in order to win my favor will find themselves rather coldly received indeed.

It was, in fact, at Ana's house that I hit upon the idea that I hoped would become something of a mid-life hobby for me. We were in her sitting room—sitting, as it happens—and drinking tea, as the blue light of dusk thickened, making the houses outside look like ghosts of themselves. Her beloved father, a wealthy industrialist (a word whose meaning I confess I do not know, nor care to learn) had just died, bequeathing to her a great many items of varying value. She was recounting the items from memory, having promptly put them in the attic, justifiably unable to examine them so soon after the funeral. Among the items, she said, was an old Polaroid Land Camera in reasonably good condition.

I asked if she'd mind fetching it. I know. A look of dismay flitted across her features, followed by an indulgent, if tight, smile. She ascended the stairs to the attic and I sat feeling somewhat guilty. I remember listening to her too-heavy footfalls in the attic, the extra-noisy

rummaging, in case I hadn't gotten the hint. I remember taking a sip of the dregs of the tea, and finding it bitter.

By the time she'd found it and come back down, she had gotten the angst out of her system. Her smile was genuine. A thought had occurred to her, I surmised. She did always like the way it felt to give a gift.

The camera is black, though a faded black, perhaps a dark grey, with an off-center rainbow stripe down the front, a round lens and a square flash like a miniature hall of mirrors. It reminded me of the ViewMaster stereoscope toy I'd had as a child, the one that showed a succession of striking 3-D scenes through the viewfinder.

Ana had no use for the thing, and as I'd hoped (okay, as I'd *expected*), she insisted that the old man wouldn't have objected to her passing it on to me, despite what he said in his toxic little letter, a letter, by the way, I still have—I look at it whenever I feel I might need to be taken down a notch, more often than you might think. I told her I didn't think that one could acquire film for such a device anymore, but she informed me that the little flat film cartridges—one of which was included with the camera—were still being manufactured, and that a shop quite close to her own house would order it in any quantity, and might even, in fact, keep a supply in stock.

The idea struck me like a cold hand on a hot afternoon: I would keep the camera in the large pocket of my overcoat and, in the likely event that I might irk some overly sensitive citizen, I would brandish the thing at him at the apex of his rage and snap a picture. I would make literal and real my collection of dirty looks, and without having to drop off film at some hut in a strip mall parking lot and wait for an hour for the results, an hour during which some pimply clerk would most certainly sneak an illicit peek.

In order to dispel the worry that there might be a delay between hitting the button and the shutter closing, allowing my unwitting subject time to staunch his or her rage, making the act impracticable, I performed a trial run right there in the dim-lit sitting room, with its flowered wallpaper and its low, plant-draped shelves and its bric-a-brac. I started to impugn those cheaper items foisted upon Ana by her deceased patriarch, items he'd likely received as part of various telephonic hoaxes and schemes meant to separate the failing elderly from their fortunes. She shot me the hurt

narrow-eyed, pursed lips look and I raised up the camera in a swoop and hit the round black button.

I needn't have worried. As the image of Ana rose out of the foggy white square like she was emerging in a rage from a steam bath, I couldn't help but grin. The only evidence that she had had a moment to foresee my upswing of the camera was the blur of her hand at the bottom of the frame, leaping up to obscure her visage, but failing to arrive in time. She softened again and we laughed over it, she and I, and I departed on that good note. I had learned over the years how to leave before one of us began to wear on the other. When *I* began to wear on *her.*

Between Ana's home and mine, a distance of only several short blocks, situated between a disused theater and a purveyor of warped and yellowed paperback novels, sat Pearlgrave's Photo & Video. I entered to find half the lights extinguished; apparently they were close to closing. The clerk, a pale, pimple-faced creature with a crooked tooth right out in front, ordered the film from a fat catalog whose cover hung on by a stitch. I swear to you that he licked his fingers as he turned the pages. Reader: I had to look away. The expression on his face as he took down my phone number wavered between annoyance and bemusement. He probably thought he had me dead-to-rights as paedophile with plans to perch near the playground first thing the next morning.

I next stopped in at Randall's Stationers, where I purchased their largest cork board and a translucent plastic box of variegated thumbtacks.

Upon arriving home, I set immediately to affixing the cork board to the wall behind my writing desk. I snapped open the box, selected a green tack, pulled from my pocket the snapshot of Ana, and pinned it to the center of the board. I sat for a while, smoking, regarding the picture. I have to say that it made me smile. I even felt a resurgence of fondness for the old girl. Sentimental old fool, me. No, we were best apart. I retired for the night. In my dreams, angry faces raged into focus and spun off into the fog, to be immediately supplanted by others, a crowd, a multitude, a kaleidoscopic throng of mute rage.

* * *

Within seven months from that day, I had acquired a good number of pictures of the angry, the affronted, and the aghast, sufficient to require my purchasing a second bulletin board on which to display them. I showed

them to guests, most of whom found them as amusing as I did. There was the scarf-swaddled intellectual, his gap tooth revealed by a comical grimace, stricken by my suggestion that he looked like a Muppet with influenza. And the teenage girl at whose falsies I openly sniggered, her acne flaring bright orange in the light of the flash, her lips cracked and dry, her eyes wide with hurt and outrage. Delivery men, street cleaners, librarians, all victims of my crimes of mirth. They would recover, and I'd benefit from categorizing and displaying the visual records.

Here and there someone would attempt to snatch away my camera, but I was always too fast for them, ready to bolt, whereas they, caught unawares, were conveniently stayed a moment by their shock. There were missteps, too, such as the afternoon I spent in the art gallery, where pretending not to notice the sculptor standing next to me, I said of one of her pieces, actually a rather lovely if inconsequential bit of stonework, that it would be greatly improved by its nonexistence. Rather than sneer, her face crumpled and she burst into tears. The day was saved, however, by her husband, all white, wavy hair and small pink mouth. His jutting chin, severe blue eyes, flared nostrils and bared teeth is one of the centerpieces of my collection.

* * *

One wet, rain-soaked afternoon my phone rang; it was my brother Samuel, calling from his home in Oregon, where his young wife had died unexpectedly in the course of what should have been a routine surgery. I had rather liked Maureen. She was tiny and cheerful, and always keen to know whether one had or had not been recently fed. She dressed poorly, but with a confidence that somehow made charming the frumpy dresses and the askew leggings. God, she was a cheery little chipmunk...it seemed like such an outsized death for such an inconsequential little person. I was taken aback, and arranged a flight straightaway.

The funeral home, Messier & Sons (rather an unfortunate name, really, for such a place), was a tall, sterile-white house located at the furthermost curve of a well-appointed cul-de-sac and ringed by a disproportionately large and mostly empty lot, the lot hugged by a too perfect line of immaculately squared-off shrubs. For the hell of it, I chose to park at the farthest reaches, angled across two parking spaces, a choice made more

amusing (to me, anyway) by the fact that my auto was certainly no treasure, what with the dented bumper and rust spot at the passenger door.

The facility was the apotheosis of its kind, carpeted in Berber, all shades of grey and tan, wallpaper of neutral design, as cheerless and antiseptic as a basement meeting room in a two-star hotel. They appeared to have picked from some strange catalog of geezers-for-hire the man who stood at the door, a very old, bent bird with a shining bald head and a trim body clad tightly in a three-piece suit, the tie expertly knotted. I wondered briefly as to whether he himself might be a cadaver who'd snuck up from the inevitable refrigerated room in the basement. I vowed to ask him later, should the opportunity arise. He swept his liver-spotted hand toward the sign that announced "Maureen DuFon" in curled and swirling letters, and I dutifully veered left, scribbled my name in the guest book, and arranged myself, holding my hands at my belt-line and bowing my head, as one does, next to a stack of folding chairs on a cart.

Across the room I saw Samuel emerge from a cluster of mourners and approach, his eyes clear, not rimmed pink, as I might've thought, his expression neutral. Sedated, I presumed.

"Martin," he said.

"Oh, Sammy."

"You're looking well. How is our Ana?"

"The same. We get on better now. Our boundaries are fairly firmly established."

"Would you ever give it another go, do you think?"

"As likely," I said, "as you and poor Maureen."

His face darkened. "You are exactly the same," he said, and walked away, shaking his head.

I really am a mystery, as much to myself as to others. I tend to think myself witty, untouched by counterproductive emotion, a refreshingly irreverent wag, dark-minded, but not cruelly nor devilishly so—people might shake their heads, but in the end, I surmised, they loved me. Maybe this was true of the younger me. Maybe I had grown out of control as surely as I had grown out of youthfulness. Maybe I was an embarrassment. I felt pitiful, but knew that I deserved no pity and should expect none. It seemed wrong to just leave, however, and I vowed to redeem myself back at the reception at Samuel's house. For the time being, though, I made

myself scarce. I located a set of stairs that led to the restrooms, and ascended, my hand tracing the white balustrade, my spirits very low.

At the landing stood a small telephone table with a curved drawer at its front. No other person being in evidence, I slid open the drawer and peeked inside. Within lay a roll of antacid tablets, torn at the end, a few scattered business cards, and a bobby pin. I moved to shut the drawer, but it had come off its rail. I wiggled and pushed at the thing, but to no avail. Finally I left it, and took to roaming the silent halls, gazing at framed paintings of gardens meant to look cheerful, but in fact looking quite forlorn. I found the over-lit men's room, relieved myself, and exited to find the hall fogged with a strange haze, as though somewhere a clothes dryer vent was pumping in steam. As I headed back to the stairs, the haze thickened into a grey fog, so much so that I could not see more than three or four feet in front of me.

I couldn't manage to find the stairs. The layout of the second story had seemed fairly simple: four rooms of equal size arranged in a square, and a fifth, smaller room at the far end, adjacent to which I swore had been the landing with the table and its drawer of this-and-that. All connected by straight hallways. And yet, as I made the circuit a second time, cut down the center, and turned right, and then left, the stairwell was not in evidence. At the third go-round, I spotted through a thin curtain of mist in that far room something that gave me a start.

The room itself was brightly lit and free of fog. Standing there, facing a great armoire, was a very tall man with a curtain of slick black hair hanging from the back of a hat that must have been an antique, a stove-pipe hat, I think it's called. He raised a hand to open the door of the armoire and I saw that his long fingers were encased in a profusion of silver rings of various designs. They tapped together like wind chimes. Not wishing to startle the apparition, I elbowed a ceramic bowl on an accent table so that it made a hollow rolling sound. The man turned, and I had to restrain a gasp. His eyes were a terrible orange color, his nose angry and long, his ears prodigiously large, like dessert plates, his mouth a thin brown line. He moved toward me swiftly, out of the room, into the fog, disappearing for a brief moment and then reappearing before me. He took up my hand in his. If he was a revenant, he was one that smelled of English Leather and Ivory Soap. "Anders," he said, or something like it, by way of introduction.

“Well, aren’t you a tall drink of arsenic,” I said, and he grinned, showing me an expanse of almost blindingly white teeth. “Are you here for Maureen’s soul?”

“I’m sure I don’t know who that is,” the man said.

“Thinking of moving in?”

His eyes narrowed and his lip curled, and instinctively my hand went for the camera, which, of course, I had not brought with me. It was back at Samuel’s in my baggage.

He marked the movement of my arm and he smiled an avid smile. I could practically count his teeth. “Oh, darling,” he said. “The intent was there. All I needed, really. It’s been a pleasure working with you, and I mean that sincerely. It isn’t always, you know. People are not always so amusing...at least not on purpose. Perhaps it won’t be so bad for you. At any rate” – here he yawned and looked at his wristwatch, which was very old and encased in a tangle of cobwebs—I’ve been for too long a wander, and I had better be getting back.”

“Sun about to come up?”

The jape hit him right, I guess, as he threw back his head and laughed. “You’re a sharp one, Mr. DuFon,” he said. “It’s almost rather too bad.”

He walked away, still laughing, turned a corner, and was gone into the haze.

I was shaken by the encounter, but perversely glad that I had been able to engage another human, if that is in fact the correct appellation, without having come off as a damnable cretin. I turned, and the stairs were there, as they had surely always been. The fog or haze or whatever it was, was dissipating, as though it had accompanied the tall man to wherever it was he had gone. I went back down to find the first floor all but deserted. I avoided the casket and found a folding chair in the back, where I sat and stared up at the ceiling until I felt right.

When I arrived back at Samuel’s after the terse ceremony and the short line to gape at the body whilst pretending to pray, the house was brightly lit and teeming with young people all talking over one another.

Rather than try to make amends with Samuel, not wanting to talk to anyone really, and overcome with an almost desperate exhaustion, I moved through the throngs like a wraith, fell onto the guest bed amongst my belongings and my bags, and went immediately into a dreamless sleep, my clothes and shoes still on.

* * *

In the morning, everyone having dispersed but Samuel, he and I shared a quiet breakfast in his faux-country style kitchen, with its red plaids, its dolls of straw and its folksy quilts and framed cross-stitch atrocities. I wandered through my thoughts and opted to remain mostly silent as he told me about the last time he spoke with Maureen. Essentially, they had alternated between lazy, familiar bickering and the batting around of banalities. I do not think of that as a poor last conversation, should you be curious. I perhaps should have said as much to Samuel.

What I did say, at last, was, “I’m sorry.”

“Martin,” he said, “What’s wrong with you?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I replied. “I’ll do better. Will you allow me that?”

“You’re my brother,” he said, which was almost an answer, and would have to do.

I felt terrible leaving him alone in the house he had shared for so long with his wife. He was standing in the doorway as I drove off, seeming so small, so forlorn, bereft. He held up a pale hand, and I nearly burst into tears, so overwhelmed was I with a sense of great desolation. What was left for him? For any of us? I felt certain that a great cancer surged through everything, that all must—and should—die and rot and blacken and wither. That nothingness would be vastly preferable to the mess existence had made of itself. I wished myself a devil who could crumple the world in his fist and swallow it like poison.

* * *

The flight home was harrowing. A black shag carpet of thunderclouds massed below the airplane, with lightning zipping through it like static electricity. The plane rocked, jumped and shook, and here and there, seemingly for variety, it would plummet God knows how many miles before catching itself as though it had landed on some cosmic or meteorological trampoline. It was frigid in the cabin, and more than once I was compelled to request blankets. The stewardesses were shooting me the hirsute eyeball, but I found myself with insufficient motivation to capture the moment. Indeed, all I craved was sleep, and at that I was thwarted at every effort. If there wasn’t a food cart clanging down the aisle or the

terrible shrieking of a feral toddler, there was the cold. It insisted on creeping up under the blankets and coating my skin like wax. I confess I arrived back in Massachusetts haggard and underslept, still gripped by the ashy hands of melancholy.

The cab home was warm, thankfully, and I rudely resisted the driver's insatiable need for chit-chat. When his attempts became too much, I whipped my head against the side window with such force that the car was jerked from its lane. He was silent after that, but I could feel his need the way one can sense when someone is staring at one from afar.

When I slipped the key into my front door and opened it, I was greeted once again by a frosty cold, and with it as a companion hung a thick and sickly fog. This fog had a different nature than that of the second storey of the funeral home: for some reason I cannot name, it seemed utterly imbued with illness. It seemed to be harboring in its folds influenza, plague, histoplasmosis, and unknown fevers transported by bugs from remote and savage jungles. It smelled of the coldness one encounters in long tunnels under bodies of water. I felt my way to the study, yawning compulsively and repeatedly, despairing of the fog surely finding its way into my lungs, but unable to stop. The fog in the study was the thickest I'd encountered. I sank to the mildew-soaked carpet and into a depthless sleep.

I awoke some hours before dawn, blanketed in fog. Visibility was more or less one inch. I got to my feet and walked over, as though by instinct, to the corkboards. I moved closer to the wall until my nose was an inch away, and I stared.

The photographs were all of my own face, and instead of anger, mine was an expression of abject, despairing terror. In each, I was surrounded by the same terrible fog; in each, something…some*one* …loomed behind me, barely visible. I could discern orange eyes, searing with triumph, and long, searching fingers encased in elaborate rings. I turned, and something faded into the fog.

I cannot seem to find the door. The windows are stuck shut, and outside it is always night. Sometimes, in the distance, I hear the thumping of skin on wood, someone calling out my name, Ana, maybe, it's too far away to tell, or…or Maureen. And then more people join in, calling my name in rounds, in sing-song rhythms. I try to follow the voices, but the fog thickens, and something in it, something in my house, and near,

terribly near, laughs at me, a hollow laugh, cruel and devoid of humanity. I am certain that if I continue along the wall, moving my palms up and down its surface, I will find the doorknob. I dearly hope I find it before the orange-eyed thing finds me.

A Song of War and Death
by Errick A. Nunnally

He hadn't received any desert training, had never seen the desert before today. And he was lost.

The operation was supposed to have been brief, a precursor to a massive, joint operation with Moroccan allies, a chance to live-fire some of the excess ammunition that had been stockpiled over the years. Just one of many stops on the continuous Mediterranean patrols U.S. Naval forces had been operating since WWII.

And for a desert, it's pretty fucking cold , Len thought. *And dark* . At least it wasn't all sand and dunes, this was a barren area of packed dirt and tough flora. The cold emptiness in the night air clung to his skin, magnifying the nightmare of being completely alone. He didn't have to look up at the night sky stretching forever in all directions, a pitched blanket smothering the world.

Nothing he'd learned from Basic or Infantry Training School made sense at the moment. He hadn't been carrying the comm, nothing but orders to spread out on a patrol exercise. In the dark. In the desert. The end of which was supposed to be a battalion-wide, live-fire exercise. Then hours cleaning weapons, not something to look forward to.

He wasn't sure he was marching in the right direction. No coordinates, no map. His compass didn't matter unless he was willing to walk over a hundred kilometers north to find the ocean. He was a grunt, a speck in the battalion being shuttled from coast to coast.

Shit .

He checked his watch. Over one hour since he'd last seen the lights of a Humvee in the distance.

His fingers ached, clutched around the handle of a squad automatic weapon. The SAW was starting to feel like twenty-one pounds of concrete, a weight that was going to tear his arm off at the shoulder. Long ops made him regret being issued the machine gun.

New to the platoon, the weapon had fallen to him. Heavier than the standard M16, no one wanted to carry it. Despite all the flak he took for

being issued the thing—like it was a sucker's job—he enjoyed the feeling of superior firepower close at hand. Thirty pounds of ammunition, clipped to his webbing, flopped against his thighs and dragged at the straps across his shoulders.

The dark infinite of nothing enveloped him. Range, a sense of space, even his hearing seemed warped, but for the huffing of his breathing and the crunch of his boots. His missing senses were replaced with a tingling fear. Fear of a bad fall, of flesh being torn and bones being broken. Of dying out here, alone. The constant sense of walking along an unseen precipice strummed his nerves. Every fifty meters, he'd struggle to relax his jaw and shake the rigor that came with constant tension. Every itch sent signals that some poisonous thing was about to stab his skin.

Apathy had driven him to join the Marine Corps two years ago. There hadn't been many opportunities available—none obvious anyway. After his mind-numbing years in high school, he had no desire for college, stuffing grocery bags, or pumping gas. The military shined bright. There hadn't been a significant conflict since Nicaragua, nothing to keep him second-guessing the choice. Tony "Len" Lenun had finally escaped the 'hood and that was that.

The only time he'd questioned the decision was during basic. They'd informed the platoon that war had broken out and they'd be deployed soon, before the end of training. Some of the recruits began to cry, but none of them dared openly protest. Then the drill instructors popped a CS can under the bleachers and watched while the recruits embarrassed themselves coughing and struggling to maintain some composure. Just a stupid, fucking test. But it had left his heart pounding and vision tunneled. The fear had been tangible. It felt like that now.

He unsnapped his helmet, annoyed with the way the webbing had been chafing a raw channel down the center of his head.

And he heard the low, whistling moan for the first time. It sounded like wind blowing across a hundred bottles. Without wind. Or bottles.

Placing the helmet back on his head and re-snapping the chin-strap, he muttered, "That's gotta be wind."

He took another step and heard it again. Not a howl, but a long, low note, ending with an audible chuff.

"Not wind." He swallowed the knot in his throat and tried not to add 'fear of being eaten' to his list.

The noise had come from somewhere in front of him. He shouldered the SAW and peered into the dark, heard the crunching of earth, and backed up. It came at him like a wall of sound, an eerie, unfocused and steady reverberation. There was no cover: no outcroppings, no depressions to hide in.

The low notes again, closer, a chorus now.

He backed up, his eye trained down the barrel of the SAW against his shoulder.

“Fuck this.”

Len turned and ran, away from that sound. It was nothing like he’d ever heard before—not in zoos or nature programs. He had no desire to discover a new species. Or an old one.

The gear in his rucksack rattled dully. He slung the machine gun over his shoulder so he could use both hands to pull on the straps that would tighten the pack. The tightening had no effect, and the hollow rattle continued, like the sound of polished wood being jumbled. It came from all around and nowhere. He ground to a halt and the din stopped. He peered down. All around him, a field of bones, as far as he could see.

He stumbled back into motion, changing his path, moving toward what he hoped was freedom, and spotted a figure running.

Len shouted, “Hey!”

The figure didn’t stop, it…disappeared.

Sweat burned his armpits and eyes, the pack’s straps chafed under his arms and the SAW’s sling abraded the flesh on his neck. He was sure he hadn’t imagined it.

Behind him, nothing much changed, and he picked up his pace.

He called out again, “Hey, who’s there? Hello?”

“What the fuck are you doing out there, soldier? Double-time!”

Len ignored the misnomer, suppressing the reflex to correct the speaker, and sprinted, following the command, wondering why the Army was out here too.

He almost didn’t see the trench before he was right on top of it and leapt in, crashing into the rear of a rough-dug channel, feeling immediate relief at being under cover. His feet just missed a crouching figure in the shadows.

“Who the hell are you now?” Len recognized the voice that had called to him moments earlier.

“Lance Corporal Lenun, 1/8. Who the hell are you?”

“Corporal Pike, 2nd Cavalry. You got some moxie bein’ way out there like that.”

Moxie? “What the hell’s the Army doing out here?”

Before Pike could answer, Len heard a muffled cry to his rear.

The man he’d just avoided landing on sat with his knees up to his chin, arms and legs clinging to a long, bolt-action rifle and bayonet. Beneath a Doughboy helmet and thick, green uniform, the soldier whined. His legs were wrapped in puttees, a man out of time.

“What the fuck is this, who’s this guy?”

“Doesn’t matter, he’s been like that since he got here, don’t mind him. You Marine Corps? We got a BAM at the other end o’ the line says she’s Corps too. Never expected to see a broad in combat gear.” Pike shifted from foot to foot, his eyes wide.

In the low light, Len could see the gleam of sweat through the grime on Pike’s face, his loose-fitting uniform was wrinkled and filthy and he wore an obsolete M1 helmet. Len also noticed an odd cadence to Pike’s speech, the sort of staccato heard from an actor in the 1940s. Over Pike’s shoulder, he could make out the silhouettes of others in the ragged trench, too many to easily count. The hunched figures stretched down the line. He began to feel what was becoming the familiar vibration of panic at the back of this throat.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Len could hear the whistling tone again, closer now.

“Holy shit! Is that a machine gun? You got rounds?”

“I…yeah, but…”

Pike turned and shouted, “Where’s the lieutenant?” To Len he said, “We need a gunner on the line here.” Pike pointed with little jabbing motions in conjunction with incessant nodding.

Behind Pike, the men passed the word.

“Hey, God damn it, line for what, man?”

“Jeez, I didn’t see you was a black.”

“What the fu—”

“The loo’s a bluenose, but he ain’t no admiral, so it’s no problem. Here he is.”

What looked like a British officer slipped through the narrow pass. “What’s this, Corporal? Report.”

“Sir, a newcomer, Lance Corporal Lenun. Look what he’s carryin’ right there.”

“Pike, be a good lad and check the integrity of the trench down by the maquisards—good Lord, is that a machine gun?”

Len gaped, struggling to steady his breathing. The officer was tall, wearing a tight green dress uniform and leather cross strap. The cover he wore made it obvious he was an officer. At his hip, a holster with pistol; beneath his nose, a pencil-thin mustache.

“Ah, right then, introductions: Leftenant Ellrod, Royal Army, 1972. Pike there’s from 1941. What year are you, Lance Corporal?”

“What?”

“The poor, shellshocked soul behind you, we think he’s from 1901. Year, lad, spit it out, what year are you from?”

“I… 1988, sir.”

“Right, the *future* . Is that a machine gun?”

“Uh, yes…sir.”

“We need you positioned here, crossfire with the gunner at the far end of the line.” Ellrod indicated the direction with a stiff arm before returning to parade rest. “Precious little of your future weaponry available, but we’ll make do. Isn’t that right, soldier?”

“Marine. Sir.”

Ellrod had already turned his back, the discipline of command motivated his every move. Len’s mind swam with confusion. He hesitated until he heard the ghoulish sound again and set up his weapon at the edge of the trench.

“Steady on, men!” Ellrod’s voice cut the cool air. “Be at the ready!”

Len clutched the grip on his SAW and laid his cheek along the stock. In the darkness, he thought he could make out shifting movement. Sweat dripped down his back and his skin crawled with a thousand ants of adrenaline. Near his feet, the soldier in the Doughboy whimpered.

“Hey,” Len hissed at him, “Hey, what’s your name, do you know what’s going on?” Len used his foot to nudge the soldier.

He responded with a deep breath and heaving sob. Then the soldier raised his head and answered, “This is death, this is death…it never ends.”

Len clenched his teeth, struggling to settle the queasy feeling in his gut. The man had a weird accent, almost British, but not quite. “What are you saying?”

Again, no answer.

“You American?”

A nod.

“How’d you get here?”

Shrug.

“How do you know this is death?”

A sniff, and then he said, “Because that’s what we do.”

The moaning sound caressed their ears, bolstered on the steady crunch of footsteps. Len closed his eyes, took a deep breath and racked the SAW.

At the edge of his vision, figures shuffled in the gloom. Dark forms. Len couldn’t make out details, but he could hear the low groan they uttered. He fished a small tactical scope out of his pocket and pressed it to his eye. Nothing but magnified shadows in sight. The shapes remained there, but without detail.

Len muttered to himself, “What is this?” Then he twisted his head to look left over his shoulder and called to the men closest to him. “What is this, who’s that out there, what are they?”

The soldier to his right looked up, over the wooden stock of a long rifle with a short magazine. His eyes were flared into bright, white circles as he spoke in a breathless hiss of air. “It’s battle, damn it, endless God damned battle! We killed, we died, we’re here to kill again.”

Ellrod’s voice cut the air. “Let ‘em have it, boys!”

An odd cadence of firing began, single shots in quick succession and pops that sounded like a dozen different calibers. Len looked down the line as different muzzles flashed, some rifles issuing more smoke and light than others. The sound of it was more chaotic than any firing range he’d ever been on. At the far end of the line, he could hear the rattle of familiar weaponry, but he took little comfort in that.

Len ground his teeth and looked out to the killing field. The figures were closer, he could make out pale skin and rifles. They’d mounted bayonets and begun their charge. Some dropped, cut to pieces, others twitched and kept advancing. Len fidgeted, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and struggled not to crack the teeth in his clenched jaw. The long gouge of earth they crouched in was barely wide enough for a man’s shoulders, he could feel the back wall if he let his foot wander. He felt trapped.

He pressed the scope to his eye again, and this time he could see the enemy clearly. Taught, pale skin, nearly emaciated in appearance. Dark uniforms and hollow eyes. Some wore helmets, some did not. They were all armed, in one way or another, with a hodgepodge of rifles, reflecting the line of allied troops he stood with now.

“Lance Corporal, fire that weapon!” Ellrod stood no more than a foot away, he held his officer’s pistol at his side, his full attention turned to Len. “Your fight’s not done yet, Old Tom, let loose the dogs!”

“My fight? I wasn’t fighting, I was just lost in the desert!”

“What? You’ve no combat experience, you haven’t been under fire?”

“No. Sir.” Len stared into Ellrod’s confused eyes, ignoring the din around them, the shouting.

“Then you’re alive, son.”

Ellrod’s incredulous tone hit Len like a slap. Confused, he shook his head, trying to find words in response. Ellrod’s statement, the comment came out as fact, not question.

Men cried out, weapons continued to fire.

“Sweet mother of God, you’re alive!”

Len shouted back, “Of course I’m alive, we all are!”

“You’re not supposed to be h—”

Ellrod flailed to the side, a bayonet shoved through his throat. Pinned to the opposite dirt wall, the dying lieutenant emptied his pistol into the attacking wraith. Len watched, a dumbing fear racking his brain.

The man to Ellrod’s back turned his rifle on the thing, and when it emptied, he reversed the rifle and smashed it with a glee only the mad should be able to muster.

Len stared at the quivering, emaciated enemy, thought how brittle they must be and what might power them. He looked up at the advancing lines. They’d broken ranks, and this one had arrived first, spearing Ellrod without hesitation.

He thought of the home he’d left, the friends he’d outgrown, the neighborhood he’d abandoned, his parents, his country, and what it all meant. Then he opened fire. Len raked from the outer edges in, aiming low, dropping them at the knees, pounding them with rounds as they fell.

Spent shells and links rattled around him, hot bits of metal sailed over his shoulder. The soldier next to Len roared, slamming a fresh magazine home. The second wave of wraiths high-stepped over the first. Len’s barrel

smoked and his fingers felt numbed by the thrumming action of the jackhammering bolt.

His weapon shocked into silence, the chamber lay empty.

He screamed, “Reload!” And went to work replacing the ammo box.

A half dozen wraiths bore down on their position, the soldier to his right fired for center mass, slowing the things, dropping one or two. The remaining enemy fired at the trench, kicking up dirt and Len glimpsed the terrifying flash of muzzle fire aimed in his direction. Dirt sprayed over him.

Head down, Len rammed the bolt home and pulled the trigger, firing up into enemy faces. Three heads exploded, dry bits showered down with their bodies. He turned the weapon on more of the advancing creatures, cutting them down, panning his sights to the right again. His vision collapsed into a kill zone as the SAW’s barrel began to glow.

“Hot!” Len pulled the gun, shrugged the spare barrel off his shoulder, and unlocked the smoking one. The motion saved his life twice: bullets flicked off the edge, throwing more dirt over his head and he caught a glimpse of movement to his left.

A wraith lunged at him from inside the trench, long pointed barrel led by bayonet. Len flinched and the blade raked acid across his shoulder, skimming off the top of his helmet.

He roared at the hissing thing, twisting and grabbing at the creature’s weapon with his left hand. He brought the hot barrel in his right hand down on the thing’s head and it clanged off its helmet. He pulled back, keeping a solid grip on the enemy’s rifle and drove his hot barrel into its face. Another wraith appeared behind the former, lunging forward, its blade pointed at Len’s heart.

The shellshocked soldier—the young man Len thought of as ‘1901’—stuck a leg out and tripped the monster. It stumbled into its fellow and collapsed under Len’s hammering blows.

“No, no, no, not again, not again,” 1901 muttered, aiming his rifle at another wraith in the trench. The blast tore half its face off, blowing the back of its head out. The thing dropped.

Len nodded at his revitalized ally and said, “Watch our backs.”

1901 answered by working the bolt on his rifle.

He locked the spare barrel into place and popped back up into his kill zone, letting loose bursts of well-aimed fire. Occasional shots to Len’s left

reminded him that 1901 held position, minding his flank.

Down the line, to his right, the firing slowly petered out, replaced by the feral cries heralding hand-to-hand combat. More of the things came, a third wave. Len could hear the machine-gunner at the other end of the trench, but didn't recognize the sound of the weapon. They worked together to create a line of fire that cut anything in front of them to ribbons.

Len switched to shooting rounds from the six magazines he carried, keeping his fire limited to focused bursts, painfully aware he was running out of ammunition. A bitter flavor flooded his mouth and sweat stung his eyes. His sternum hurt from the jackhammering of his heart. To his left, he heard a scream and looked to see 1901 going down beneath the vicious stabs of a wraith's bayonet.

Len turned, ripping the thing nearly in half with a burst of fire. More followed and he marched forward, stepping over the fallen soldier, firing madly down the line of the trench. Wraiths began pouring over the edge closest to him, engaging fighters in close combat. Len spared a glance at the skewered soldier who'd held his left flank. He was still alive.

Blood flowed from multiple stab wounds to 1901's upper torso, he shivered and gurgled, red showing between his teeth as he grimaced in pain.

Len scrambled for the dying soldier's first-aid kit, pulling a length of gauze out to pack the wounds.

Feeble hands pushed against his. "Stop, stop, don't worry 'bout me. It's over, finally over. Help them…fight." Despite his wounds, 1901 managed a slight smile and pointed.

Before Len could even consider a response, the soldier who'd been so stolid at his right collapsed, a bayonet jammed between his ribs. The wraith only had eyes for Len at that point, and it struggled to remove its weapon from the corpse at its feet.

All sunken cheeks and dried lips withdrawn from teeth, Len felt white-hot hatred for the things, disgust for such mindless evil that cut into his fellow warriors.

His weapon empty, Len let the SAW dangle over his shoulder by its strap and unsnapped his knife. The enemy managed to unwedge its rifle as Len closed. He pushed the deadly blade down and away, but not before the tip raked a deep gash above his hip. The monster drove the brim of its

helmet into Len’s nose. A bright flash of pain blinded him and a sickening ache lanced through his face and down his spine. He held fast to the enemy’s barrel.

Len drove his Ka-Bar hard into the thing’s face. It sank to the hilt, Len withdrew and lunged again and again until it collapsed. He surged forward and leapt on the next creature struggling with a French soldier in colorful uniform.

Len slammed the point of the combat knife into the base of its skull, just beneath an ersatz Kaizer helmet bearing an insignia he’d never seen.

An amorphous light smeared across the sky. Blazing, glorious warmth rolled over them as the field of battle quieted in the glow. A thundering of hooves and an unfamiliar song lit Len’s ears. The last of the wraiths had fallen to the dozen or so soldiers left, illuminated by the oncoming brilliance. At the other end of the trench, he could just make out another Marine—more modern than him, extra padding, streamlined flak jacket, weird mount on her helmet. She was a small woman whose cheeks were a red ruin. Wearing a spattered pilot’s uniform, holding a pistol limp at her side. She made eye-contact with him and recognition sparked in her face. She gave a weak salute and collapsed while raising her blood-slick chin to the streaks of light arcing towards them.

Len shivered, the warmth and light too much for his senses. He shielded his eyes and heard 1901 calling to him. He turned and knelt by the dying soldier.

“You have to go back,” 1901 said in a weak and wet voice.

“I don’t understand.”

The dying soldier pointed, up and out of the trench, away from the fight. “Go. Go now, go home, go.”

“What’s your name?”

“Go…”

Jesus .

Len hauled himself over the edge of the trench, hurling his body as fast as it would go away from the encroaching light, an emotional wave of comfort. The song followed him as he ran, his feet pounded on uneven ground. He had a powerful urge to look back, to stop and give in, but he dared not.

The heat and light rose around him, an unending power washed over him, called for him to come back, to let go. He ran and stumbled, ran and

cradled the hot SAW under his arm, muscles screaming as the light and sound built to a crescendo, enveloping him until—the cold dark snapped back into place.

Back to the nothingness of the desert, of being lost in the dead space between. He sobbed and fought the drag on his limbs, doubting his own sanity even while feeling the undeniable pain of ragged war wounds and the warm flow of blood down his arm, torso, and cheeks.

Time passed, as inexorable as ever, but he ignored his watch, not caring how much of it had come and gone. He needed to keep going, to get away. Len tripped on a rough outcrop and fell hard to his hands and knees. With a harsh grunt of effort, he raised himself and forged on, the battle still humming in his ears with the song of death and endings written. He barely registered the sting of ruined skin on his shins through the fog of fatigue.

In the distance, he heard the roar of engines and voices calling his name.

Crumpling to the ground, he called out, his voice hoarse and raw. He unclipped the moonbeam from his flak vest and held it aloft, shouting while he mashed the button to blink the flashlight to life, sinking deeper into the murk of exhaustion.

From the blessed gloom of barely-there-consciousness, he registered voices around him, hands grabbing at his body.

“We got him, we got him! Corpsman! Here—”

“Holy fuck, he’s fired all his ammo—”

“Multiple cuts—”

“—dehydration—”

“—missing the spare barrel—”

“—loss of blood—”

The prick of an I.V. stung his arm, a few drops of water flowed into his parched mouth.

“Stay with us, Marine. You hear me?”

Len coughed and felt a stupid grin split his lips before the corners of his mouth turned down and he gagged on a wave of grief and inexplicable loss. Just knowing hurt more than his wounds. Knowing what awaited them after spending a life waging war, he wondered who or what the enemy really was. The only thing he was sure of was what awaited them in the end.

Salt Cave
by Morgan Sylvia

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe I shouldn't have come here.

I stand in the morning sun, shivering, pulling my khaki jacket tighter. The scent of pine and ice hovers in the chilly spring air. The woods are silent around me. I don't know this place. The bend and curve of the land is alien, inhospitable and forbidding. These are the same woods that cover all of New England, but they seem wilder here, untamed. There is nothing but rocks and pine trees for hundreds of miles. I drove hours on the remote access road, which winds through unbroken wilderness, to reach this spot. Couldn't tell you a single landmark I passed, except the one that marked my destination: a rusted-out hulk of a snowmobile with deer antlers stuck to its grill.

Minutes crawl by. I pace with anticipation, check my gear for the hundredth time. Waiting is torture.

In time, I hear the distant rumble of an engine.

I am relieved and terrified at once. My thoughts become frenetic, chasing one another through my head, firefly bursts of panic and excitement. I breathe deep, force myself to focus.

A muddy blue SUV comes into sight, navigating the sodden road more easily than my poor, mud-splattered car did. The vehicle rolls to a stop and a tall man gets out. He is thin and lanky, his skin leathered by frigid winters. We've never met before, but I know his kind. Men like him are woven into the landscape here, as though they are part of this desolate stretch of pine forest. Most likely, he's spent his entire life in a tiny town that never changes, his worldview shaped by beer and hard winters. His world is plaid flannel and muck boots, a big TV in a small trailer surrounded by woodpiles, snowmobiles, and rusting trucks.

"I'm Paul," the man says, extending his hand. I shake it nervously. His skin is rough and calloused.

"Thanks for taking me," I say, forcing a smile. "This really means a lot."

“No problem,” he says, with a smile that never reaches his eyes. “Happy to help.”

The politeness is just that—a courtesy. He isn’t doing this out of kindness. The sum I sent him is almost extortionate, but worth it. I can’t blame him for price gouging. Hunting season is long over. We’re too late for winter activities, too early for summer ones. By the looks of him, he doesn’t often see more than three figures in his bank account, especially at this time of year. Then again, most of the people I know are broke or close to it, myself included.

I don’t have to ask where the money will go. He’ll drive to the nearest store or city—Bangor, I suppose—and wait in a long line for necessities: booze, bacon, gasoline, bullets. After this, I’ll be living on credit. Somewhere warmer, if I’m lucky.

I wonder again if I’ve made a mistake.

Two weeks ago, I was sitting at my desk in my tiny apartment, browsing spelunker blogs. I had only recently resumed my search. *Run towards the problem* , I kept hearing people say. And then, in a bourbon-fueled moment of impulse, I did just that. Actually, I wrote my way towards the problem, by posting a series of blogs. Every time I clicked *Publish* , I sent my terror and my questions and my secrets out into the world. It became cathartic, a way for me to make my mark in an uncertain future.

I didn’t expect an answer.

His email surprised me. *I’m a registered guide in the County,* he’d said. *I know the place you're talking about . It’s called Salt Cave. Matches the description exactly.*

He was initially reluctant to take me. But everyone has a price.

Paul hands me a walkie-talkie. “Cells won’t work in the woods,” he says. “Won’t work in the cave, either. Only satellite phones work out here, and that shit ain’t cheap. We go missing, we’re missing.”

I watch his body language, noting the pocket he keeps checking. That’s where the knife is, I assume. I don’t need to check mine: I can feel its weight against my calf.

I have no intention of becoming a victim.

He spits onto the ground. “You bring what I told you?”

I nod. Flashlight. Water. Matches. Socks. Duct tape. Knee pads. Carabiners. Thermal blanket. Food. First-aid kit. Spare batteries. Cord.

And a few things that aren't on his list: a vial of pink salt, the rat skull in my pocket, and a battered, leathery notebook, which contains everything I know about my origins. There are more questions than answers on the yellowed pages. A lot of what is written there is indecipherable.

He jerks his head toward the wilderness. "Got five miles to go before noon, to get back here by nightfall. Gives you a couple hours, at most, in the cave. Access road is closed after dark to anyone who isn't a local. If you get stopped by state police on the way back, you tell them you were with me. You get stopped by feds, do *not* mention my name." He tilts his baseball hat back, squints into the pale blue sky. "You sure you're up for the hike?"

"I can make it," I say, with more conviction than I feel.

We set off into the forest. Silence envelops us like a blanket. It is early spring, what Mainers call mud season. The air is chilly, though the sun is shining. The last bits of melting snow falls from tree branches, filling the woods with the sound of dripping water. Our boots leave tracks in the muddy earth. I try to look for landmarks, but everything looks the same. A woodsman, perhaps, may note the bend of the land, the shape of a tree. But I'm a city girl. It's all just wilderness to me.

We skirt the edges of a bog, where the skeletons of dead trees reach for pale skies. "Not many people go looking for Salt Cave," Paul says, breaking the silence. "Why did you come?"

I answer uncomfortably. "I thought it was something of an urban legend around here."

He laughs. "This place is hardly urban. Nothing here but a couple thousand square miles of woods. Most of our legends never make it past the county line." He pauses to consider this. "Suppose the internet changed that." He glances at me, sizing me up again. Tries his question another way. "Why you so interested in Salt Cave?"

I'm not paying him to interrogate me. "Does it matter?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Nope." He punctuates the word by spitting on the ground. "Guess not. Watch your step here."

I wonder if he knows about them, their voices, their whispers, their songs. I don't know what they are or what to call them. I only know that they are waiting for me. They send me dreams and nightmares. Spiders carry their thoughts to me, no matter where I am. They sing of death and dying stars, of cracked old bones and spider webs.

I say nothing of these things. The forest swallows my thoughts.

We reach a marker I can actually identify—a tree that bends at a 90-degree angle—and turn right. The sun rises further in the pale sky, a diamond against blue-grey eternity. I look up and think of the blackness beyond it, the endless abyss of stars and sky.

We climb a steep, slightly unstable path. The guide tells me to step where he steps.

I wonder what his heart will taste like.

* * *

I wore thick socks, but my feet blister anyway in the new boots. I am limping by the time we stop for lunch beside what I assume is usually a small stream. Right now, the water is still muddy and rushing with melting snow. Wet spots on the banks show its track. A week ago, the rock I am sitting on would have been underwater.

“It’s still beautiful here in summer,” Paul says. “That water is crystal clear, and tastes better than anything you can buy in a bottle.” He bites into a real sandwich. Maybe he isn’t as broke as I thought. I’m eating rations. “Most of the spring melt is done,” he tells me, speaking around a mouthful of food. “The ice on the rivers has broken up. There’s flowers poking through the snow, further north. Hoping the ducks will come back this year.”

Neither of us mention the fact that the melt is a month early, if not more. We don’t mention the wars, or the plague that is devastating the southern states. These discussions require trust and honesty. These are conversations that, once un-bottled, cannot be corked again. I suppose most of his clients come here to escape those things. I can understand why. In this unbroken expanse of forest, the madness of the modern world, with its electric webs of surveillance cameras and cyber-streamed virtual realities, seems a million miles away.

He points at the ground, where a huge pawprint has sunk into the mud. “Bear,” he said. “Mutated, a bit. Should only have five toes.”

I’m not his typical client. I don’t care about these things. I don’t care about the line of geese that flies overhead, bisecting the pale blue sky with a ragged V. I don’t care about the hunting ban on moose or deer, which are now endangered, or secret fishing spots, and I don’t give a flying fuck about the beaver dams he points out. He talks about these things for a few

moments, and then slowly remembers that, unlike his usual customers, I'm not here for any of them.

Paul seems to realize that the small talk is pointless, and gives up. We finish our meal in silence and move on.

Miles unfurl slowly beneath our feet, painful step after painful step. We pass ponds and ATV tracks on occasion, but for the most part, we just follow the stream. Every step takes me further away from civilization. I wonder what I would do if I had to get back alone. Canada is fairly close, but with the border closed, that route would be a risk.

I scan the terrain at every tiny sound, certain that at any moment a mutant bear or wolf is going charge at us. All I see are squirrels, and one glimpse of a brown thing the guide tells me is a deer. There should be birds here, but the woods are silent.

The next marker is a sigil drawn on a stone. I stop in my tracks to stare at it and something in me bursts free. I pull the rat skull out of my pocket, and look once more at the glyph drawn on it: a circle, bisected by a single horizontal line.

The boulder and the skull have the same mark.

I remember the day I got that skull. It was about five years ago. I had just gotten out of work and was wandering the streets of Boston, another lost soul in a maze of cold steel. A woman emerged from an alley and grabbed my arm. She was filthy, her eyes wild and wide. I instinctively looked up for the nearest camera and moved towards its red eye, trying to get within recording range. She ignored this. "The spiders told me you were coming," she said, foul breath framing her words. "I knew they would send someone. Tell *them* I am coming. I just need to save money for the bus. And I have some more bones to collect." Her next words struck my brain like bullets. "But I'm ready. I'm ready to go back to the cave."

She pressed the rat skull into my hand and then ran off into the night, disappearing into the warren of alleys and paths that tunneled through the damp shadows. My first instinct was to throw the thing away. Then I noticed she had painted something on it: the sigil that has haunted my dreams since childhood. The same one someone painted on the boulder I now find before me. It's also drawn on the pages of my journal. It took me years to realize what it is: the alchemists' symbol for salt.

Paul turns, impatient. "Everything ok?"

I nod and mutter a brief apology. We move forward, going ever deeper into the desolate forest.

I wonder what the spiders know of this place.

* * *

There are places where worlds meet at the seams, where the edges of our existence fall into oblivion. The line where water and land meet, where fire meets wood. There is a space, however tiny, between those boundaries. Cracks in our reality. Sometimes things cross through those spaces.

That is where the cave lives, in the space between my thoughts. Or, where it has lived, until now.

I sense it before I can see it. My skin prickles into goosebumps. Something in my soul awakens, a dark thing that crawls through the depths of my awareness, pulling me forward like a magnet. I look at the ground and see dead birds lying atop the carpet of fallen leaves. The wind carries a faint echo of a voice I suspect has never been human.

Welcome home , it tells me.

I see no border, no boundary, but I sense the shift in the air. Cold slices into my lungs. A diamond-like icicle falls from a tree and smashes on a rock beside me. My thoughts shatter with it.

The air smells like blood.

“We’re almost there,” Paul tells me.

The mist closes in around us unexpectedly. I frown, puzzled. It’s too clear, too late in the day, for fog. Yet visibility dims until I can see only a few feet in front of me. I am in a small bubble of nothingness. Everything around me is completely lost in fog. I hear the white-noise scream of static in my mind.

My compass spins, unable to find true north.

They are here, suddenly, patches moving in the mist, shapes on the edge between shadow and light, water and air. They are tall and thin, formless wraiths with only black holes for eyes and mouths. Ghostly appendages stretch up between their shoulders: wings, perhaps, or pincers. It’s hard to tell. The air falls silent, becomes thick with their presence. A cold breath touches the back of my neck, but when I turn, the figure dissolves into mist. Like the others, it is unearthly, a thing of fog and shadow.

I am surrounded.

I can only see them out of the corner of my eyes: when I look directly at them, they are gone. I feel the ice of winter in the air. Ethereal fingers tickle my shoulders, caress my hair. They speak not in words, but in thoughts. Images burst in my brain, violent explosions of color and sound. I hear their song, curling and weaving through my mind. Visions rise through my consciousness, twisted images that melt and break apart, frozen realms, a red sun, kaleidoscopic dreams of churning primordial skies.

The last image is either a nightmare or a recollection: A massive, fleshy monster, wrapped in cords of blue-grey veins, moving toward me. It has one bloodshot, yellowed eye, which fixates on me.

The vision terrifies me. I open my mouth to scream and one of them inhales my terror and my breath. They slip through my thoughts and memories, rooting through my soul. I can taste nothing but salt. This should disgust me, but I revel in it.

Paul is somewhere in the mists ahead of me, obscured from view. I hear a branch snap beneath his feet, and then his voice breaks the silence, calling for me.

The mist clears. I cannot see them anymore, even askance. The world pauses, falls to slow motion. I taste blood in my mouth. The colors look different. The sun blinds me, burning the mist away. Something crosses the sky on red wings. I look ahead, and see before me the cave I have dreamt of since childhood.

We have arrived.

The entrance is nothing but a gash in the ground, a C-shaped line of blackness cutting the earth open. There is little about it to bely its true nature, save the sigil drawn on the massive boulder nearby.

“This is it.” Paul stops and turns to look at me. “Salt Cave.”

In my earliest memory, I am standing in the same place I am right now. It is hotter, though, the forest still green and gold and alive with wildlife. A man stands at the cave entrance. “This is it,” he says. He holds out his hand. “Watch your step.”

I remember nothing after that, until the children’s home.

I look into the mouth of the cave and I can almost feel time slipping past me in an endless stream. I am, in that moment, an aborigine, seeking shelter from the storm. I am a bear, shutting my eyes against the approaching cold. I am a distant star, bursting into being in an ecstatic,

unholy blast of matter and energy. I am a child, exploring forbidden places. I am a thousand women, a thousand men, a thousand children. Names and lives flash past me, leaving me sweaty and shaken.

Paul looks uneasy. I can tell he will rush me, that this place makes him uncomfortable. I wonder what hardship forced him to take the job. Kids? Bills? Sickness? I realize that I don't care.

He steps into the cave and is lost in shadow. I follow silently. The air is cool and damp and smells like mud and copper. Something in my blood sings to me: a song of dust and bone and abomination.

The dun-colored cave walls are slick with moisture. Tendrils of fog cling to the ceiling. I know what the dampness will taste like: chalky, salty. Like old bones.

We move forward. I glance behind me and see the green and gold circle of light at the entrance shrink and vanish into oblivion. Darkness presses in around me. My muscles tense, and my heart thuds in my chest.

For most spelunkers, caving is an escape, a break from the sleek black buildings with their rows of cubicles, the endless, multi-legged entity that is humanity, with its dead eyes and pallid faces. Not me. Usually, when I am inside caves, every cell of my being is shrieking in terror. I absolutely hate caves. I've hated caves all over the world. I hated Mammoth Cave, with its safety rails and electric lights. I hated Rhino Cave, The Cave of Beasts, Reed Flute Cave, and dozens more. I've never once set foot into a cave because I wanted to.

Every time, it's the same: claustrophobia sets in, and crippling, choking fear takes hold of me. My heart pounds in my chest. My lungs starve for air. I feel nauseous. Anxiety prickles my skin, a cold feather tracing down my spine. I force myself to crawl forward, scuttling into the dank, dark earth like some insect. I never would put myself through that, if not for the burning desire to find this place again.

This time is different. A strange sense of calm comes over me. The twists and turns look vaguely familiar, like some half-forgotten dream. I breathe in huge gulps of stagnant air. The molecules fit perfectly into my lungs.

This place is sacred. This place is unholy.

I follow Paul deeper into the cave, far beyond the reach of the sun. The rat skull begins to whisper to me again. Its transmission is louder here, almost musical. I make out patterns, codes, and then individual words. It

sings about dark stars and ancient algorithms, about the things that crawl through the blackness before us. It sounds like wind. It sounds like screaming. It sounds like the dream of some demonic beast slumbering far below the earth.

It falls silent. There is only darkness ahead, shadows and secrets and the whisper of something yet unknown.

* * *

There are things we take for granted: Wind. Sunlight. The sky above us. Water. Food. Fresh air. Here, in absolute, primordial darkness, all of these are taken from me. Light and sound dissolve into thick, unbroken shadows. The smell is that of damp earth, the gravestink of ancient bones. There are no soft grasses here, only sharp edges and hard rocks and things that scuttle away from our approach, things that cannot bear even the faintest light.

We keep moving. Eventually, the tunnel opens out into a chamber.

There is a circle on the floor, perfectly drawn in large salt blocks. I see the sigil on the wall. It is faded, its outline almost indistinguishable from the stains.

“They say the witches used to come here,” Paul informs me, breaking a long silence. “Back in the early days.”

Memories bubble up through my thoughts, seeping into my neurons. I want to tell him the truth. But instead, I keep quiet.

Paul gives me a few minutes to look around, then clears his throat. “Well,” he says. “That’s it. That's Salt Cave. We need to head back pretty soon if we're going to make it back to the access road before dark.”

He turns to leave. I shine my light down another passage, an ink-black gap in the walls. “Not yet,” I say. “I want to go deeper.”

Paul keeps muttering about fading daylight. It's clear he wants to leave this place, but I demand to go further. We move on, entering a thin tunnel that winds down into thick, choking blackness. The walls weep. There are primitive paintings here, primordial art, things drawn soon after man crawled out of the slime of ocean depths and turned his face to the sun, things drawn long before we built tall, cold, hive cities, long before we drained the earth of life and color. The paintings have faded and run. What was once a brilliant, vivid mural is now a few smears. Yet the outlines

remain. A bear, perhaps the ancestor of the monstrosity that left those tracks by the stream. A deer. A wolf. Three moons.

As I look at it, the next memory hits with an almost physical force. I remember the painting as it once was, its crimson and ochre hues vivid with dye and charcoal. I remember sparks rising through these very chambers. I put my hand to the damp wall. Something with far too many legs crawls over my fingers. Instinctively, I reach out and grab it, popping it into my mouth.

Paul turns around to see how I am doing. He is clearly nervous. Fear has cast a sheen of sweat on his face, which is drawn and pallid. I can almost taste his impatience. He wants to be done with this place. He wants to be home with his canned beer and his real sandwiches and his government-sanctioned television.

“We're almost to the end, ” he tells me, his voice tight. “You ok?”

I give him a thumbs-up and keep picking my way over the rubble-strewn floor.

We move on, deeper and deeper into crushing blackness.

The tunnel branches off. The guide stops suddenly before the new path, which swallows the light from his flashlight. “That’s odd,” he says, frowning.

“What?”

He points at a boulder beside the tunnel's mouth. “The boulder was moved. That passage was blocked before.”

The static scream returns, louder now. It is becoming a song, a song of cosmic rage and decaying light. “Can you hear that?” I ask him.

His frown deepens. “Hear what?”

I don’t answer. He shines his light down the passageway. The beam picks up an unexpected flash of color. A pink backpack, dusty with age. I know that if I pick it up, I will find my initials written in marker on the inside. If I open it, I will find what was once my favorite doll.

The air blurs. The tunnel fills with mist. Tendrils of fog reach for us like fingers. We can see nothing ahead of us.

They surround me again, their voices, their touch more urgent now. They whisper into my ears and into my thoughts, codes that unlock the mystery festering in my soul.

* * *

A man in a lab coat, speaking into a phone.

"They got him," he says. "Dragged him in." He pauses. "No, something has them riled up. They're acting weird." Pause. "I'm heading out now. I should be back by-"

He drops the phone, his face paling, as something crawls forth from the black depths. I look up him. "Papa?"

"Come," he tells me, holding out his hand. "We have to go out the back way. Hurry."

He half leads, half drags me though the tunnels, always urging me to hurry, hurry. My little legs can't keep up, but I try. When we reach this spot, we hear a rumble behind us, which rises into a deafening roar. The walls shake.

"Run!" he tells me. I drop the backpack in my haste. He won't let me go back for it.

* * *

At my insistence, we continue on. We are only a short way into the tunnel when Paul's flashlight flickers and dies. Mine follows suit a moment later. Complete, crushing darkness surrounds us.

I am in the abyss, returned to the void, cast into the center of the earth. The universe has shrunken around me. I am a molecule. I am a memory. I inhabit the space between living and death, between the wood and the fire, between sound and silence.

I hear him fumbling with his pack. "Damn cave," he says. "Drains batteries. Hang on."

Then, from somewhere in the darkness, I hear something moving.

Paul freezes. "Wait," he says. "I heard something."

The light clicks on. He turns, pointing the beam at me. Suddenly, he gasps and flinches. His face turns white. "What the *fuck* ?"

I frown, puzzled. I look behind me, but see only mist. "What?"

"Your eyes," he stammers. "They've turned black!"

Red eyes appear in the darkness beyond him.

Paul takes a step back. "Fuck this. Fucking bullshit. This cave ain't no place for jokes. What are you? Are you an android? I'm done. I'm going back to-."

Just as he turns, something grabs him and hauls him backward, into the dark tunnel. He struggles, but the thing's grip is iron-tight, and it drags

him away from me. I glimpse brownish, leathery fingers tipped with long claws grasping his arms, and then the light from his flashlight fades as he is pulled into the black bowels of the earth. The light grows smaller, receding into a pinpoint, and then winks out completely. Moments later, I hear a distant, bloodcurdling scream, which is cut short. There is a thud, a crash, and then silence.

I am left alone in complete, stifling blackness.

Panic overtakes me. The cave swallows my screams. I manage to change my flashlight batteries, but to no avail: the device still won't work. Then I remember my phone, feel its weight in my pocket. No signal, of course, but the flashlight app works. I turn it on and keep moving forward. Endless passages lead me further and further down beneath the unseen crush of rock above me. Time loses its grip on me. The tunnel walls close in. I crouch and then crawl and finally slither forward, squeezing myself through narrow passages. I feel as though I am shoving my way through some birth canal. More than once, I almost get stuck and have to force myself through. Things that have never seen the light of day crawl over my skin, dancing across my face. The spiders sing madness into my thoughts. I notice that they have extra eyes wavering on stalks above their heads. I begin seeing flashes of strange colors.

They press in closer, whispering to me. They speak of forgotten stars, of a cold, dark sun, and a salt-laden planet they once called home. I move forward, pushed and pulled. The mist clears, revealing walls covered with spiders. Atonal music rises around me, discordant and eerie. I follow their song further and further into the lightless tunnels.

Sometime later—hours or minutes, I don’t know—my phone battery dies. I keep going, and almost fall into a chasm. I throw a rock over the side, but never hear it hit. I inch my way forward, moving along the gap until I feel walls around me again. Eventually, my path is blocked by smooth, cold steel: a door. Opening it, I half-climb, half crawl through.

I find myself on a tile floor. The walls here are smooth, unnatural. Nature does not make straight lines. It does not create perfect doors, or coat walls in sheets of metal. The ambience and echoes of my footsteps tell me that these halls are vast. The song in my soul tells me they are familiar.

I navigate the maze by memory, until I see the glow of murky, reddish light ahead. Another door waits before me, framed by a ruddy light from

the chamber beyond. I open it and step through, finding myself in a round room that appears to be some kind of chapel.

In the center, Paul's corpse lies on a pile of human bones. There is a bloody hole where his heart should be.

Static fills my thoughts, melting into song. Something scuttles over my foot and crawls up my leg. I feel a sharp pinch as it pierces my skin. A moment later, the dam bursts in my brain, and it all comes rushing back. Truth trickles into my thoughts in dark, oily rivulets.

I hear movement in the darkness. A figure steps out of the shadows, wearing the dirty remains of what used to be a white lab coat. Beyond him, something big casts a shadow on the wall. Something with more than two legs.

My voice is ragged with thirst and dust. "Father," I croak.

He welcomes me in my native tongue, and catches me in a tight embrace. "I knew you would return," he tells me. Stepping back, he looks me over. Then he hands me Paul's still-dripping heart, bows, and moves aside.

My sisters press close. I feel their memories, their joy, their hatred. They guide me forward, towards the pool of water at the far side of the room. At its edge, the flame that dreamt us into being still burns. Our servants, who guard this place, welcome me back one by one, scuttling forth out of the dark to greet me with celebratory screeches and clicking noises. Hovering above nightmarishly beautiful faces, their eyes fill with bloody tears.

I look down the hall, where, under red lights, I see the egg-like shapes of the cocoon sacs lining the walls of another chamber. Within them, more of my kin lay torpid, perhaps dreaming of dead stars, as I once did.

I do not know if we were summoned or trapped: I only know that the gate, the rift, changed us. We were born in primordial chaos to a realm of airless skies and waterless seas. We condensed, in this place, from vast, gaseous beings to tiny things, our mass shrunk to spider size. We lay wrapped in cocoons for eons, slowly shaped by the dreams of man and beast alike, until the man in the lab coat injected us with his DNA.

By the time I pulled the webbing away, I was human.

* * *

“Someday,” my father tells me, many years past, “you will come back here, when you are ready. But you must go out into the world and face it on your own for a time. I cannot live among men any more. I must tend to the others.”

He presses the notebook into my hand. “Come,” he says, leading me into the forest. “It’s time.”

I blink in the daylight, unable to bear the touch of the sun. A deer carcass lies on the ground before us, rotting. I move towards it, hungry suddenly, but he holds me back. The ground rumbles beneath my feet. From somewhere behind and below us, we hear the sound of a great crash as the lab’s other entrance collapses and is sealed beneath a mound of rubble.

* * *

I open the notebook. I can read the text now, but the language is thick and convoluted on my tongue, alien to this human mouth. I perform the rite, and then bite into the heart, feeling muscle tear between my teeth. Salty blood fills my mouth.

The cave fills with dark, seething color. My father steps forward. The spiders gather around, weaving dreamspells in the velvet air. Their song is madness. Their song is truth.

Then the pain hits, searing hot and freezing cold. My molecules burst and realign themselves. My thoughts become tendrils of fog, winding among grave-black passages. I feel the flesh slough off my bones and fall to the floor. Something monstrous and veiny shuffles forth, the thing I recalled earlier. It slurps up the skin, organs, and hair I have discarded. Father carefully places my bones on the pile with the others.

Unmade, I go to join my sisters in the unwinds at the edge of the pool. I have become like them, a thing of shadow and mist. I remember the moment I *became* . I long to return to that primordial chaos. I am wind. I am the storm. For a moment—or perhaps for an eon—I wait in the fog with the others, transmitting dreams into salty flesh.

The waters of the pool are still, mirror calm. Somewhere in their depths, I see the twinkle of distant stars. They are long dead: the faint starlight is nothing but an illusion now, conjuring the ghosts of forgotten suns. The galaxy ahead is colorless, dead and frozen. But it is home, regardless.

It is time to go. There are other worlds, other gates, to conquer.

I step into the void.

Somewhere in the night, a child awakens, visions of the cave churning in her thoughts.

The Sweetness and the Psychic
by LL Soares

He was my first real lead, sitting there in the middle of the motel room, hiding behind dark glasses and a worn fedora. I tried to make him feel at home, but there wasn't much homey about the room. His name was Willoughby, and I didn't know a lot else about him. But I was grateful I'd been able to track him down, and that he had agreed to meet with me.

"So you can see me?" I asked, sitting across from him on the bed. He sat on the only chair in the room.

"No," he said, "Not like you see. Not with the *eyes* ."

"Then how?"

"With the mind, brother. I can see every detail of this room, I can see *you* seeing *me* ."

"And you can see the future?"

"Sometimes."

I wanted to believe him, but I wasn't sure how much I did. I reached out and held my hand in front of his face.

"Waving that hand," he said, "Like you don't trust me."

He could have felt a slight hint of air when I moved my hand; he could have heard it in front of him. I wasn't convinced yet.

"You know where the boy is?" I asked.

"I saw him last night. In a dream. A dream that was more than a dream."

There was a pause, and I waited.

"A dream that was a doorway."

* * *

When I first arrived in Rust Bottle, Missouri, I didn't have a hell of a lot to go on. One of my contacts had heard something. I wasn't sure if it was relevant, but I was desperate. I had been on this case for two weeks, without a lot to show for it, and the boy's father was getting antsy. I knew

that if I didn’t deliver something soon, he’d shake me off and move on. As far as he knew, I was stringing him along.

My contact, Freeform Ed, was the one who put me into contact with Willoughby here. A blind psychic who had helped the police with a few missing persons cases. Supposedly legit. But I didn’t believe in this kind of thing, so his legitimacy wasn’t a sure thing by any stretch. I’m a pragmatic man, though. I’m skeptical, but I can be convinced if you get me results.

Willoughby didn’t move a muscle, sitting there.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked.

“Some water would be nice.”

I went into the bathroom and filled up the complimentary glass with water from the sink. It was slightly yellow. I wondered how much lead was in it.

I held the glass in front of him. He didn’t hesitate, just reached out and took it from me.

“Bottled water would have been nice,” he said, “This local water has a bitter tang to it.”

“Sorry, I don’t have any bottled water.”

He nodded and took a sip. Then placed the glass down on the carpet beside the chair.

“So tell me where the boy is.”

“I don’t know that,” he said, “Not an exact place where he is. But I do know how you can find that place.”

“How?”

“It’s not good business to give information away for free.”

I got out my wallet and fished through the bills. When I took out three twenties and looked up, he already had his hand out, palm up, and I placed them there. He didn’t move. So I added two more.

“There’s two things I have to say to you,” he said.

“I’m listening.”

“There’s a house on the edge of town here. The Dowager Place. You’ll find some answers there. Not all, but enough to point you in the right direction.”

“The Dowager Place. Is that the name of the street or something?”

“I’m not going to draw you a map. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“And the second thing?”

“If you taste the sweetness, I sincerely urge you to walk away.”

“What?”

“Sweetness. If you taste it, leave.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You will,” He grinned then, and shifted enough to put the bills in his pants pocket.

“That’s all you’ve got?”

“You’ll call on me again,” he said. “But yeah, that’s all I’ve got. All you’ll need. For now.”

He got up, stood there a moment as if getting his bearings, and then he walked to the door. I was going to say good-bye, but he didn’t stop. He just opened it and let himself out.

* * *

No one I talked to had ever heard of the Dowager Place, so I just drove around in neighborhoods near the borders where Rust Bottle bled into neighboring towns. He said I’d know it when I saw it, but nothing caught my eye. Willoughby had conned me.

I went back to the motel room and cracked open a beer. It was a really hot day, and the AC wasn’t very good. And it made a hell of a racket.

I drank a few more beers, and eventually was able to fall asleep.

* * *

The next day I filled up my gas tank and went driving around again. If I didn’t find anything two days in a row, then I’d know for sure Willoughby was feeding me a line of bullshit. But I had to know for sure.

I went down a street that looked familiar from the day before, and took a turn at the end. Then I noticed the *one way* sign and realized I was going the wrong way. I stopped the car.

And there it was.

There were strange markings spray painted on a stone wall near the house. They looked like hieroglyphics or something. Writing out of an old mummy movie. And that immediately caught my eye. The house next to the wall was old and in disrepair, and most likely abandoned. There was nothing to identify it as the *Dowager Place* . The street it was on was called Lincoln.

The front door was locked, but it was an easy enough job getting in. It wasn't the most sophisticated lock I'd ever seen. I had my flashlight and I looked around the place. A few pieces of furniture here and there. One room was completely empty, except for the dust on the floor. I had gloves on, but I tried not to touch anything. I did try the light switch, but the power wasn't on. I didn't open the blinds. That's why I brought the flashlight.

I didn't see anything that could be useful. I found a trapdoor that led up to an attic. It was too small to stand in, and I crawled around, shining the light, but there wasn't anything of worth.

I found the door to the basement and went down. There wasn't much there, either. A rusted old tricycle. A water heater.

On the water heater, there was something written in what looked like blood.

Help me .

* * *

When I didn't find anything else, I got out of there and drove into town. There was a diner where I had gotten a couple of meals, and it was decent enough. I ordered the pork chops and looked at the picture on my phone that I'd taken of the message on the water heater.

It wasn't a lot to go on.

But it had to mean something. It was ominous enough. A cry for help.

Was it the Bellerium boy? Had his kidnappers kept him in that house for a day or two as they planned their next move? It certainly seemed that way, if Willoughby was to be believed. He said I'd find some answers. This was the closest thing to an answer I had.

The waitress, an older woman named Margaret with graying hair, who had probably worked in that diner all her life and would probably die there, brought my plate over and refilled my coffee cup.

"Sure looks like rain," she said.

"Yeah."

She walked away and I put my phone down and picked up a fork and knife. Started cutting up the meat. It was red and bloody inside. Too rare for pork. You had to be careful with that. So I called Margaret over and asked her to have the chef cook it a little longer.

She nodded her head and took it away.

I looked at the picture on my phone again.

Help me.

* * *

“Missouri, you say?”

“A small town called Rust Bottle,” I said.

“And you have a lead?”

“Yeah, I do.”

The man on the other end cleared his throat. “Mr. Bellerium will be happy to hear that. He hasn’t gotten much in the way of good news.”

“Well, don’t build it up too much. Just in case it doesn’t pan out.”

“We take hope where we can find it.”

I was talking to a Mr. Cook, Mr. Bellerium’s assistant or lawyer or something. It wasn’t clear what his role was, but he did most of the talking for Mr. Bellerium, who couldn’t be bothered to have a conversation with someone like me, even if it was about his son’s life.

Someone had kidnapped Bellerium’s kid. They made it clear that they had him. The boy didn’t just run away or anything. But there was no follow up. No request for a ransom. No instructions. Nothing. Bellerium was adamant that the police not be involved. I don’t think Mr. Bellerium’s line of business was something he wanted the police sniffing around. You’d think a man like that would have some crooked cops on his payroll who would be good at tracking lost people, but if he did, they hadn’t helped him much.

It was clear that I was a last resort. That Bellerium had come to me only because he didn’t know who else to ask. He knew I’d keep it quiet. I had issues of my own.

“You there, Mr. Rinder?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I thought you’d left the call.”

“Just thinking, I guess.”

“Mr. Bellerium instructed me to tell you that you have three more days. If you don’t have something substantial in that time frame, Mr. Bellerium will have no choice but to terminate your arrangement and find an alternative resource to sort this out.”

“I understand.”

“You seem like a reasonable man, Mr. Rinder,” Cook said. “I knew you’d understand. Call me again when you have more. But three days is all you have left.”

“I’ll call you every day with an update.”

“No. Just call if you have something to give me. Don’t waste either of our time. I’ll call you on the third day if I haven’t heard from you.”

“Okay.”

“Hopefully you’ll have some good news soon.”

He hung up first.

* * *

It was late and I couldn’t sleep, so I grabbed a chair and sat outside my room in the parking lot. It had rained earlier, but not for very long, and it had gotten comfortably cooler at night, and it was quiet. A lot of the other rooms were dark. I had a cooler beside me full of beer bottles, and opened one.

Something moved in the dim light of the lot. As it got closer, I saw it was a dog. He came over and sat beside me. I reached down and rubbed his head. He stuck out his tongue and panted. I got up, went into the room, and poured a glass of water. I put it down in front of him and he bent his head and lapped water from the surface of the glass.

I sat back down and petted his head some more.

There was a crescent moon in the sky. The dog was a mixed breed. He was friendly, but looked a little mangy. Neglected. If someone at the motel was his owner, they weren’t taking very good care of him. Then again, he was probably a stray.

I didn’t have anything decent to feed him. I’d get something in the morning.

The dog stretched out on the ground beside me and went to sleep.

* * *

I didn’t know what else to do, so I went back to the house where I’d seen the *Help Me* message. I searched the place once more, from top to bottom, and had no more luck than I had the first time. I went down to the basement again and the water heater was clean. The message had been wiped away. But that meant something.

It meant someone had been there since the day before.

Someone who might be aware that I was there now. Who might be waiting for me to leave again.

I looked at the picture on my phone. At the *Help Me* message. It had been real, all right.

As I stared at it, I started to get a strange taste in my mouth, in the back of my throat. A sweetness, just like Willoughby has described it. It made my eyes water. And it got stronger. *Sweeter* . I rolled my tongue around, licking my lips trying to get rid of the taste, but it wasn't going anywhere.

I left the basement and got out of the house. Went back to my car.

I sat there, watching, but no one else came by or left the place. I was alone. The sweetness was still in my mouth, but it had diminished since I left.

It didn't fade completely until I drove away and was a good distance from the place.

I went and bought a bottle of bourbon to wash the taste away.

* * *

"I'm not so good with photographs," Willoughby said.

"I thought you said you could see with your mind," I said.

"I can see you," he said, "I can see the room around me. I'm just not good with photos for some reason."

"It's a white water heater," I said, "There are words written on it. Looks like blood. *Help Me* ."

"So I was right," he said, and smiled.

"And I felt that sweetness you were talking about. It was a strong sweet taste in my mouth."

"You left the house then?"

"Yes."

"Good. It's nice to know you were listening. That you're taking me serious."

"What was it?" I asked, "The sweetness."

"A warning," he said.

"The message proves someone was there. But someone wiped it off."

He nodded.

"I need more," I said, "This isn't much at all. It's certainly not an answer. You said I'd find some answers."

“Well, you’re on the right track; that’s an answer. The fact that you tasted the sweetness is proof of that.”

“I’ve only got two more days,” I told him, “And then they’ll fire me. I’m running out of time.”

“You’ve got a dog now,” he said.

The mutt hadn’t left since the night before, and I didn’t have the heart to shoo him away. I’d gone to the store and gotten him some food. The dog ate like he hadn’t had a meal in days.

I grunted. I didn’t see how the dog mattered in what we were talking about.

“So how long you been this way?” I asked him.

“Been what way?”

“You say you’re blind, but you can see me. You saw where I should go for the message. Have you always been this way?”

“For a long time,” he said, “No rhyme or reason to it.”

The dog went up to him and he rubbed its head. Then he got to his feet.

“So you’re not going to help me anymore?”

“I didn’t ask for money this time, did I? I haven’t seen anything else to tell you.”

“So what should I do? I can’t just sit here, twiddling my thumbs.”

“Go back to the house tomorrow,” he said.

Then he left.

* * *

I took the dog with me this time. I left him in the car with the windows rolled down. I figured if he ran away, there wasn’t much I could do about it. It wasn’t like I was planning to adopt him. I was just taking care of him while I was in town. He sat there, his head hanging out the open window, watching me.

“Good boy,” I said.

I went back in the house. I didn’t see any sign that the houses nearby were occupied, but if there were any neighbors I’m sure they thought I looked suspicious. So far, nobody had called the cops. Then again, this wasn’t the kind of neighborhood where people did that much.

I went to the basement first this time. There was fresh blood on the water heater. Words.

It Hurts.

I took a picture of it and went back outside.

The dog was gone.

* * *

I stared at the photograph of the note that had been left behind when the kid got grabbed. It read simply, *WE HAVE HIM* . The handwriting was odd, and looked somewhat like a child's, but it was examined, and it was not the victim's. Aside from the fact that the kid was gone, this was the only evidence.

"What are you looking at?" Margaret asked. I didn't know she was awake. I'd swung by the diner on the way home the night before, and asked her to go for a drink. We had ended up here, talking most of the night. I told her a lot about my case. She seemed to be pretty knowledgeable about the town, since she grew up here and never left. For one thing, the house used to be owned by a family called Doger, not *Dowage* r, and there was a murder. That was easy enough to check, and she was right. Mr. Doger killed his wife and kids six years back. No one had moved into the house since.

"You going back there today?" she asked.

I didn't have much of a choice. It was the only lead I had. All trails ended there.

"Can I go with you?" she asked.

I nodded. I didn't see any harm in it. Besides, since she knew the area, maybe she could fill in some blanks for me.

She got out of bed and I watched her bare ass as she walked to the bathroom.

I wondered if the dog would ever come back.

* * *

When we got to the Doger house, the first thing I noticed was the stone wall near the building. The hieroglyphics had been covered up with about a hundred flyers, all exactly the same, all with a face on them. I had to go closer to see exactly what they were. Each of the flyers asked "*Have you seen me?* " and the photo was the most recent picture I'd seen of Benjy Bellerium. Like the kind of thing you'd see on the side of a milk carton. I had no idea where the flyers had come from, but I took a picture of one up close with my phone, so I'd have the phone number. Then I took another

picture of the entire wall, showing the way they covered it up like wallpaper.

I emailed both photos to Mr. Cook.

“What is it?” Margaret asked, coming up behind me.

“It’s the kid I’m looking for.”

“That’s pretty damn creepy,” she said.

And she was right. The fact that someone had created these flyers and papered the wall with them, knowing I would be back here, gave me chills. I was sure then that I was being watched. There was a good chance that Cook already knew about this. *Someone* posted the flyers here. But how did he know the exact location? I hadn’t told anybody about this place. And, if they already knew about it, then why did they need me?

I reached out to grab one of the flyers, and something really weird happened. My fingers pressed the wall as I touched the paper, and I swear, I could feel the wall moving *away* from me. As if recoiling from my touch. Like it was alive or something. It made me jump a little. Margaret asked what was wrong, but I didn’t say anything. I was trying to wrap my mind around it.

I didn’t wrap long. I left the wall and headed towards the house.

Margaret and I went inside and she stayed upstairs while I went down to the basement. As I trained my flashlight beam on the water heater, I noticed it was wiped clean again.

Then I tasted a slight sweetness in the back of my throat.

Movement caught my eye. I followed it with the light. There was something on the ceiling, something big, moving very fast. I only caught tiny details, it remained one step ahead of my light throughout. I followed it to a far corner of the cellar.

When it disappeared, I saw what looked like a small human being on the floor below where it had been. I went closer, keeping the light on it. Examining the face, I saw it was Benjy Bellerium. He was incredibly pale and not moving. I presumed he was dead, then he stirred slightly. I reached down to shake him.

The sweetness returned then, stronger than before, filling my mouth and throat to such a degree that I felt like I was choking. I remembered Willoughby’s warning about the sweetness, to leave when I tasted it, but I was determined to take Benjy with me. I grabbed his arm and shook him hard. He wouldn’t open his eyes.

I was squinting from the intensity of the sweetness that had become so dominant that it seemed to be blocking out my other senses. I lifted the boy from the floor, determined to swing him over my shoulder and carry him upstairs, but it was then that I saw the moving thing again.

It was bigger than Benjy and came out of a large, dark hole in the wall behind him.

I aimed the flashlight straight ahead with my other hand, and it was the first time since I got there that I could really see it. Whatever shivers I got from the flyers outside were nothing compared to this.

It looked like a gigantic cockroach, except even more repulsive, and it was a green that intensified and grew bright, as if lit from within. It was as big as I was, and, as it lifted the front part of its body, I could see the nose and jaw of a human face under its carapace.

The jaw was moving, as if it were speaking, but I didn't hear any words.

I did hear a scream.

I turned toward the staircase and saw Margaret half way down, terror on her face as she continued screaming.

I felt like I had been exposed to tear gas. The sweetness was overpowering and I dropped the boy, hurling myself in the direction of the scream. My eyes were only open a crack as I moved. The thing from the wall crept closer and then it was scuttling along the ceiling in my direction. I ran up the staircase, grabbed Margaret's arm, and pulled her upstairs. She helped me slam the door before it could reach us, which didn't really make sense, since it seemed to move much faster than we could. It had deliberately let me get away.

Which I suppose didn't matter, as long as I didn't take the boy with me. It clearly wanted him to stay put.

With the sweetness still tormenting me, I ran out the front door, coughing loudly. Margaret followed me. It wasn't until I got outside that the vile taste began to subside.

Then I noticed she was coughing. She had tasted it, too, but hadn't been as close to the source as I had been. It had been so intense, I was surprised I hadn't blacked out.

I had three options at that point; the first was to get in the car and drive as far away as I could, the second was to call Mr. Cook and give him all the details. I'm sure Mr. Bellerium could send some of his men to

come down and fumigate the place, most likely with bullets, in order to get Benjy back. That would also mean my part of this would finally be over, and I wouldn't have to get my hands dirty.

But I opted for the third choice. Finishing this thing myself. I got my gun from the glove compartment of the car. I hadn't brought it in before because I hadn't needed it on previous visits. I also had bought a gas mask on the way over, just in case the sweetness was something toxic. I made sure to take some extra ammo and headed back toward the house, determined to get Benjy out of that place.

Margaret asked me what I was doing, but I told her to stay outside As I got closer to the cellar door, the sweetness flared up again, but nowhere near as bad as it had been, and going outside for fresh air had definitely helped.

I put the gas mask on, turned on the flashlight, and ran down the stairs. There were fresh markings on the water heater now, a message for me to "*Leave Now* ," but I ignored it. Benjy was in the corner where I'd left him. He was moving slightly, enough to let me know he was alive, but clearly in some semi-conscious state.

"Let's get out here," I said, unsure if he could hear me. This time I did get him up and over my shoulder, and then there was a loud chittering.

There were two of them now, emerging from the dark hole in the wall, crawling quickly along the ceiling, big green blurs above me. I raised my gun and fired, the recoil shaking me enough to drop Benjy. They were fast, but I managed to get one of them and it fell on its back on the cellar floor, its legs frantically fluttering as it tried to right itself. At that moment, it made me think of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's classic story, *The Metamorphosis* . I pointed and fired again and again until its legs stopped moving.

I looked up again, searching for the other one, and upon seeing rapid movement, fired the gun in its direction. This one fell right on top of me, lashing at me with its legs, snapping at me with its vile human jaws. I made sure to push Benjy away with my leg as I struggled to load a fresh clip. The thing bit the calf of my other leg, and I almost dropped the gun, but held on tight, and aimed.

It tried to scurry away, but I had injured it. I unloaded the fresh clip into it, until this one, too, stopped moving. The bright green turned dull again.

I stood there, staring at the dark hole, waiting for more of them to emerge. Aiming my gun in the semi-darkness.

When no more came, I grabbed Benjy's arm and lifted him onto my shoulder, and moved toward the stairs.

Back in the car, I called Cook right away, to tell him Bellerium's kid was safe. Margaret got in the back seat with Benjy, but the boy was barely responsive.

I turned to look at the house, and it was then that I noticed a noise from within, getting louder. There was a swarm of those vile insects, running through the front door, out onto the lawn. I had already started the car and instructed Margaret to roll up her windows as we screeched away. Those damned things seemed on the verge of catching the car at one point, but then I took a sharp right and left them behind us.

* * *

I followed instructions on the phone as I drove to an arranged spot. Bellerium was already there, with some of his guys, and hugged the boy close to him.

Benjy made a strange gasping sound and then opened his mouth to vomit. There were moving things in his regurgitation, and I turned away, intent not to look to closely. I heard the sounds of shouting and boots slamming down on the pavement, trying to crush something.

And then it was quiet again.

Bellerium thanked me profusely and said that payment would be wired to my account. But he had to take Benjy to the hospital now.

Before he carried his son to his car, he told several of his guys to go to the Doger house and tie up loose ends.

* * *

When we got back to the motel room, I turned on the television. The news was on with a breaking story; on the screen, I saw the Doger house, consumed in flames, as firemen struggled to contain it.

There was no sign of the stone wall that had been near the house. It had just vanished.

Margaret was still in a state of shock and stood in the middle of the room, staring at the screen, just like I was doing.

"Can you take me home?" she asked.

“Sure.”

Despite all that had happened that afternoon, we barely knew each other, and she wanted to go back to somewhere familiar. I could understand that.

And I knew that, after I dropped her off, I would be checking out myself. There was no reason to stay in Rust Bottle anymore.

I knew I would never feel clean again until I left that place for good.

A Feast of Flies
by Steve Van Samson

“When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, “Come.” I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand.”

John Wraith had never much liked surprises. In fact, that was the primary reason his loaded Remington 1858 was pointed where it was. Why the hammer was forced back, and why his trigger finger was currently fighting off an itch.

The fact of it was, the stranger appeared out of nowhere. Without a sound of warning or apparently a single lick of sense, he had ridden right out of the ample dark. Like one of the night’s many shadows breaking off from the herd. And now, whoever he was, the idiot was about to get his head blown off.

“No need for that. I’m unarmed.” Said the stranger, holding up both hands. *“Saw the fire is all, and, well... I’ve been riding for a long time.”* It was a voice that fell uncomfortably upon the ears. One which seemed to vibrate the air—buzzing, like the drone of a thousand flies.

Using only his peripherals, John Wraith saw his men were on their feet now—all pointing iron at the same target. Unfortunately, the Wraith gang had only six members left and that was counting one half-blind cook and the Chavez twins, who were still out with their snares. A sad state, but things would be better when they got to Dallas. They had to be.

Wraith smirked. “The saddle has a price, friend.” He offered in a course tone. “A toll. See, the longer you sit in one, the more it takes from ya. Ask me, mister... yours has been glutting itself on your good sense.”

The stranger made no immediate response to this. Most of his face was obscured—hidden behind long, scraggly hair the color of moldy hay. Though few details were revealed by the flickering light, John could make out a sharp line of cheekbone that bordered on skeletal.

“What’s the matter, stranger?” Barked a third man. “You deaf or something?” Jim-Jack Hodge was big, bearded, and about as subtle as a

stampede.

“Shut up, Hodge.” Said Wraith without turning from the stranger. “Tell me, friend… are you riding alone on this fine evening?”

“Alone. Yes.” The stranger said this solemnly, then nodded. *“Things are better that way.”*

“Is that right?” Wraith asked with a lilt to his voice. “Better for *who* , I wonder?”

The stranger started to put his hands down, but this only caused every arm holding a weapon to renew their aim.

“Please.” Said the stranger, *“I’m not looking for any sort of trouble. I don’t need water, or supplies, and if I’m speaking plain, I never had much in the way of an appetite.”* His hands were still up—still empty but for a loop of reins around one thumb. *“All I’m after is a seat by the fire on a long, cold night. That and nothing more.”*

Wraith could feel the words entering his skull, working their way inside like something alive.

“But… if that’s asking too much...” The stranger bowed his head. *“Then I’ll be on my way.”*

“You’ll be deader than a whore with compunction—that’s what you’ll be.” Hodge grinned maniacally, allowing firelight to dance across the glistening, tobacco-stained surfaces of the few teeth he had left. Then he raised his Winchester repeater—leveled it to one eye.

“Damn it Hodge, I said *shut up* .” Wraith worked something loose from between his teeth. Spitting into the flames resulted in a hiss that might have been inaudible if not for the fact that no one present was willing to exhale.

“Come on then.” Wraith made a come hither sweep with the barrel of his pistol. “Off the horse.”

The stranger nodded, then slid from his saddle, kicking up a small cloud of dust upon hitting the earth. As for the horse, it didn’t seem to notice one way or the other. The animal was gaunt with a black coat. It was also still to the point where a fourth man, in old cavalry greys, wondered if the stranger hadn’t ridden in on a statue of a horse; rather than the real thing. This was Waylon ‘Wrongway’ McRabe—the closest thing to a navigator John Wraith had left.

After a few steps, the Wraith gang could better see their unexpected guest. The stranger wore a long greatcoat that clung like a second skin.

The garment betrayed a most emaciated form—one that to John Wraith, didn't look formidable enough to saddle his own ride, let alone be a threat to four seasoned desperados.

"Wrongway." Wraith's tone was calm but inflexible, "Check him."

McRabe shot back a glance to the man whose orders he knew better than to decline. Over the last eighteen months, he had seen John Wraith do terrible things. Though most of the really unjustified stuff had been fueled by whiskey, there were one or two incidents that tended to keep him up at night. And so, though he'd rather be doing just about anything else, McRabe trudged forward, holding his pistol out at arm's length.

After a few steps, he shot back a nervous glance. To his relief, John only had eyes for the stranger—or rather, eye. Really, the right was the only one that mattered. The skin on that side was hideous. Stained bruise-purple and covered in warty bumps of varying size. The birthmark was unmistakable. A feature every wanted poster artist made sure to embellish. It surrounded the inner corner of the man's right eye, then trailed down past his chin. It was as if the face were displaying the only tear it had ever cried. Weeping John some called him, just never to his face.

McRabe stopped, mere feet from the mysterious stranger. With one shaky hand, he reached out—perfunctorily investigating a narrow pair of hips. These transgressions elicited no reaction from the stranger, but the man doing the frisking didn't feel right. His head was off. His stomach too. Doing this was like patting down a corpse. There was too much bone and not enough of everything else.

"There a problem?" The voice of John Wraith pulled the man back into his boots. McRabe hadn't realized it, but after the hips he had just sort of frozen there for a minute.

"No. No problem, John." McRabe swallowed, wet his lips. Then, eager to avoid the stranger's eyes, he ran a quick hand down each leg before checking the boots.

"As I said… I am unarmed." The stranger smiled from behind his long hair. *"Never much liked guns."*

Ignoring this, McRabe stood up, squeezing both wrists and biceps before he slid a hand into the left side of the stranger's coat. As those fingers moved, they learned the contour of every rib—but there was nothing to find. No weapons, no hidden pockets. Hell, the coat was even missing anything that resembled a lining. Suddenly emboldened and well

past ready get the task over with, McRabe plunged that hand into the other side. That was when something moved. Something that wasn't the stranger, but rather, on him.

The hand of the man doing the frisking shot back faster than a bolt of fresh lightning as a chorus of fresh clicks sounded from behind. If every firearm hadn't been ready to fire before, they sure as hell were now.

McRabe backed up one step and then more—watching slack-jawed and horrified as the thing, whatever it was, wriggled beneath the coat. Right where shoulder met chest.

"Seems I forgot to mention the Judge," The stranger gave a narrow smile. *"Sorry about that, Wrongway. Didn't mean to startle you."*

To this, McRabe didn't know what to say. His mind was spinning. The Stranger not only had some kind of creature riding under his coat, he had just used a moniker only known and used by the other members of the John Wraith gang. Had someone else called him *Wrongway* in the last couple of minutes? McRabe tried like hell to recall. He took another step back as one hand moved to cradle his belly. It was an unconscious gesture; the body reaching for some threadbare measure of relief.

As for the stranger, he seemed to be whispering into his shoulder. Coaxing and calming whatever was hiding there. Slowly, an open hand was extended. The bulge moved again. Then it skittered nearer and nearer down to the end of the sleeve.

The face that emerged was that of a small lizard. After pausing for only a second or two, it proceeded to crawl out, filling the open palm and then some. It was a reptile unlike any the men had ever seen. The color of charcoal with a fiery orange back and a massive armored tail covered in thick scales and small, thorny spikes. The creature looked up—glaring with its beady black eyes, making the man called Wrongway feel as if he were suddenly on trial.

"He's harmless." The stranger's voice had adopted an amused quality. *"I picked up the Judge here some time back and well, we've been inseparable ever since. Sorry about the start, friend."*

"Harmless. Sure." McRabe sneered. He wanted to blurt out that he wasn't the man's Goddamned friend. Instead he kept his mouth shut and scrambled back across the remaining ground to his outfit's leader. "He's clean, John. Except for the lizard." Then he leaned in and spoke more softly. "But I don't like him. Not one bit. A man rides through Choctaw

territory with no weapon, no supplies, no hat?! And I know it's dark, but I'm telling you, there ain't no bags hanging from that saddle—not even a damn rope. Then there's that *thing* . You ever see a lizard like that? I sure as hell haven't. I'm telling you, John… something about this feller ain't right. Wouldn't we be better off sending him on his way? Or maybe..." McRabe's eyes flitted to the Remington pistol and back like a hummingbird moving between flowers.

For a few seconds, all was silent as John Wraith stood considering what he had learned. His eyes locked with those of the stranger.

"It's mighty cold out here." The stranger's voice buzzed hotly in the brain. The more John heard it, the more it felt like the call of slumber.

The other men watched intently, focused on their leader. A man they had seen shoot to kill over the slightest insult, now stood idle in the presence of a wandering vagabond who, more and more, was putting the *strange* in stranger.

"Really could use some of that fire."

Wraith had a severe look to him. Like he was circling a major decision in his head. Finally, he spat into the fire and slid his Remington 1858 back between belt and hip.

"Put 'em away, boys." He said at last. "I reckon this fire here is big enough for one more."

"What?" Blurted out Jim-Jack Hodge, sounding downright flabbergasted.

"You deaf, Hodge?" Bellowed Wraith—orange light flickering in his bad eye. "The rest of you too... I said put 'em down." The pistol had found its way into his hand again and by God, it looked angry. Despite a wash of confused expressions, the men did as they were told. Every one of them eyeballed the tall stranger as he stepped slowly into the camp proper.

"Well then," the stranger said this with an appreciative nod, *"much obliged, gentlemen. Much obliged."*

The words were a cold shiver down the spine of every man unfortunate to hear them. Every man that is, except for John Wraith, who looked about ready to fall asleep in his boots. The rest watched as their leader proceeded to plop his carcass down and kick up his boots as if none of the past ten minutes had happened. Unable to make sense of it all, they began exchanging glances. Things like consternation and all manner of objection passed between them, but not a one had a mind to speak. Instead, all eyes

moved to the stranger. Already, he had set himself down about a foot from the fire. Just beside a three legged spit which supported a pot containing about a fifth of the gang's remaining beans.

As for Waylon McRabe, he trudged back over to his bedroll.

"Never had much of an appetite." He grumbled this under his breath—too low for anyone to hear, "I'll just bet."

* * *

Setting down, he picked up a small leather-bound book. It was laying right where he had dropped it fifteen minutes prior—right when the night had gotten interesting. After dusting off the cover, he flipped past a number of pages until he found the right one. Then, eyes in a squint, he read over the last couple of lines.

'*Hot again today.'* The words had been scrawled in slate pencil. '*Was hoping for rain but none came.'*

McRabe glared at the words, wishing to God he had something better to record. Something a might less bleak... but bleak was all there was anymore. Touching pencil to page, he added…

'Food is almost gone.'

As if on cue, his belly let lose a growl like a pissed off bear. Something was wrong in there. His insides were in knots. His gut, empty and bloated at the same time. Though it wasn't easy, with a shaky hand, he managed five words more…

'Never been so damn hungry.'

The tip of the pencil snapped.

"Shit." He said to no one in particular. For a fleeting second, the only literate member of the Wraith gang considered reaching for his knife and whittling a fresh point. Problem was, his mind wasn't on the work. Looking over, McRabe found that the stranger was staring directly at him. His yellow eyes shining and stabbing like a pair of knives.

"Hey there, Wrongway." The voice was a mule kick to the side of the head.

McRabe looked up. Frowned. Standing there, just a bit too close for comfort, was one Jameson Jackson Hodge. Per usual, the man smelled like the corner of a pig pen farthest from the trough. The one where all the shit goes.

“How’s them pretty poems going?” Hodge asked with a nasty grin, then offered a wink.

“Fine.” McRabe clapped the book shut. Tucked it away in his bedroll. “But you know I ain’t writing no damn poems, dumb-shit.”

“Fine, huh?” Hodge stroked pensively his great bush of a beard, twisting when he came to the end. “Don’t look fine to me, Wrongway. In fact, it looks more like something with quills crawled up your ass and turned sideways.”

In that moment, Waylon McRabe wanted to reach up and slap the beard from the man’s face. *Wrongway* . God how he hated that damn nickname. A man makes one mistake that costs barely half a day’s ride and his compatriots brand him a fuck-up for life—just one more entry for that oh-so-legendary code of the west. Shit, McRabe thought. Maybe his mamma was right. Maybe he should have been a banker like his old man.

“Hot spit and holy shit!”

The exclamation shattered the momentary still that had settled. All eyes shot to a half-blind cook called Jerral Crooms. The scrawny old black man was waving a wooden spoon in the air and cussing in a long glorious stream, as if he was being paid by the syllable. John Wraith was first to his feet.

“Jerral,” Wraith barked, “What are you—”

“The beans! It’s the dodgasted, mother-grabbin’ beans!” Crooms dropped the pot onto the ground using a long metal hook. Then waving the steam away. “Look, damn you! Look!”

In absolutely no mood for more excitement, Wraith stomped around the fire and peered through the steam at what had become of their supper. Then, his stomach did something it had never done before… it turned.

In the pot, which had been making an absolute racket only minutes before, was a revolting, almost unrecognizable mass. The beans had turned an ashen grey and were joined together with what looked like a fibrous sludge that was most definitely not gravy. Crooms thrust in the spoon and scooped out a heaping portion which he proceeded to squint at.

“Jesus Christ in a rodeo!” Jim-Jack Hodge exclaimed. “You trying to poison us, you blind old fart?”

The cook screwed up his face. “Jameson Hodge… I ain’t never been in less of a mood for your shit than I am right in this moment.” He pulled out a finger. Poked the big burly son of a bitch in the chest. “Them beans were

fine when they went in that pot. Just fine, like every other damn night! All a' you, look for your own selves!"

Jerral Crooms stamped over to a meager pile of cooking sundries, which included a bent-handled fry pan and a burlap sack. This he threw open and held out proudly for all to see.

"There may not be much left, but my beans are—"

An audible gasp could be heard above the pops and the roar of the fire. Hideous black mold had taken the inside of the sack. Taken it so utterly that veins of the stuff were creeping up the sides. Accompanying the sight was a hideous smell, which struck the onlookers full in the face.

"Shit!" Hodge spat this with rare sincerity as he bent over coughing, gasping for clean air. "Just… holy fuckin' shit!"

The men started to argue then. Each one shouting with outstretched fingers and clenched fists until Wraith stepped in and fired a single shot into the dirt. The report hit like a clap of lightning… the thunder of which rolled out slow over the plains of the Choctaw Nation.

There was no more shouting after that. In fact, for almost a full minute, no one said a damn thing.

"What are we gonna do, John?" The voice belonged to Waylon McRabe. One shaking hand was cupped over his stomach. "There's nothing left. Nothing."

"Step off, Wrongway." Wraith's voice was low. "And calm the hell down. All of you. I don't know what happened to those beans, but we're all gonna be fine—you hear? By this time tomorrow, we'll be in Texas. And once we hit Dallas, we'll be able to sit tight for a few weeks, all comfortable-like."

"Sure. Cause the Silver-Fish has got a big score for us—that right?" Jim-Jack Hodge said with a bit too much venom. In response, one of the boss man's eyebrows adopted an arc. Then he walked over real slow until the sour reek of the bearded man's exhales was in his nose.

"That's right, Jim-Jack." Wraith pinched the brim of his hat, making a minute adjustment. "Some friendly advice though. Unless you want to die knowing the taste and texture of one or both of your intestines... I'd lose that Silver-Fish shit. Pete Decker takes even less kindly to nicknames than I do."

A wide-eyed Hodge backed up a step. Looked around like he didn't know where he was. "Got it, John. Sorry. I don't know what came over

me.”

“You don’t, huh? Well I do.” Jerral Crooms kicked the pot, painting the ground with its steaming black corruption. “Dallas ain’t gonna do shit for us if we all starve to death before we get there. Wrongway’s right. There ain’t nothing left for us to eat, John. Nothing.”

The old man’s comments birthed another wave of belly-aching, which was cut short by the dramatic arrival of two men on horseback. The Chavez twins were both brandishing their rifles and wearing wide eyes.

“John!” Said Dwayne Chavez. “We heard the shot! Is it the Choctaw? The Chickasaw?” The two horses came to a stop as both men shot glances off into the distance. The first one, Dwayne, was a large dark-skinned freedman wearing a dirty green shirt, brown vest and a full handlebar mustache. The unlikely pairing of a crucifix and badger skull dangled from a rawhide cord around his neck. The other one was called Stu. He was a smaller, coffee-skinned, clean shaven Mexican with long black hair and twin bandoliers. As it happened, the so-called Chavez ‘twins’ weren’t related by blood, but rather the happenstances of a common surname, as well as a knack for the art of trapping.

“No Indians, boys,” said John Wraith, “Just tell me you didn’t come back empty handed.”

Both men dismounted. “That, I can do,” said Dwayne. “Stu? How about you show ‘em the bounty our Lord has seen fit to provide.”

Stu Chavez held up three good-sized jackrabbits, which dangled triumphantly from a length of rope—looking to the rest about the most beautiful thing in the whole of creation. The wave of relief which washed through the camp was palpable. As for Wrongway McRabe, his gut gave a kick so strong, he felt a slight tug in his spine. In the moment, it was about all he could do to stop himself from taking a bite out of one of the carcasses right then and there.

One by one, the rabbits were handed off. Then, Crooms and each Chavez began working at the heels of their respective animal. Pink legs appeared amidst a series of dull rips as the hides were removed. Stu Chavez was the first to finish—his technique of flicking the animal with one quick wrench being the most effective. His small knife moved fast, severing the back legs, then the front before sliding into the animal’s belly.

While this was going on, McRabe’s eyes began to drift. The stranger didn’t seem bothered by the commotion. He was still sitting on his

haunches, with both hands out as if he were letting them dry.

“¿Que demonios?”

McRabe heard the exclamation distantly. It took him a second or two before he turned.

“Son of a bitch...” Dwayne Chavez made a cross. “This just ain’t possible! The little shits were alive less than an hour ago!”

As he heard the words, something was rising in McRabe’s throat. Something foreboding that tasted of panic and bile.

“No way! There just ain’t no fuckin’ way!” Now Hodge was the one raving. McRabe pushed the walking pigsty aside—peered down where the men were gawping.

“The thing’s full of goddamn maggots!” Cried Hodge. “Chavez, you liar! You two didn’t bags these rabbits, you fuckin’ found ‘em! Hell, they probably been dead a week, by the look!”

The Mexican jumped up and jabbed his knife within an inch of the bearded man’s face. From his mouth gushed a furious tirade, though none but his so-called twin could understand the words. McRabe’s eyes went wide with horror. The first rabbit’s stomach hung open like a satchel filled with black tar as well as a concentration of plump white maggots so thick, so dense, not a one of the animal’s internal organs were left.

In that moment, the knees of the gang’s navigator buckled. When McRabe’s ass hit the dirt, a mouthful of vomit was expelled to splash on the ground between his legs.

“It’s all of ‘em,” shouted the half-blind cook. “All three rabbits is rotten. And I just figured out why.” He got up, shaking from finger to toe. “It’s this place. This ain’t Oklahoma—no sir. This... this be the devil’s country.” Crooms was smiling as he spoke. “Somehow, we wandered right into Perdition… but we ain’t wandering out.”

“Shut up! Just shut the hell up!” The voice belonged to Jim-Jack Hodge. His Winchester repeater was leveled at the old man. “You’re fuckin’ crazy Crooms. This is all your fault! You let our beans get wet in the last rain, you’re just too damn blind to notice. That’s the only explanation! You’re the reason we come to this! The devil ain’t here, old man… but I am.”

The gunshot was sudden and louder than the voice of God. Loud enough to crack the sky. Jerral Crooms clutched at his chest—not from any newly made holes, but for the pain his heart was currently putting out.

The Chavez Twins looked in awe to the man in the white hat. Once again, the right hand of John Wraith was gripping his trusty Remington 1858. The pistol's barrel was still smoking—still pointing in the direction of Jim-Jack Hodge. Everyone watched the burly son of a bitch stumble one step to the right, then fall in a bearded heap of dead meat.

After the gunshot echoed away, the primary sound was a steady roar, accented by the occasional pop and snap. But there was another sound too. A wet, greedy sound.

Heads turned. Jaws fell slack to gape in silent horror.

There was a man on the ground. A man in old cavalry greys. He was hunched over with his back turned to the rest. He was eating. The Chavez twins exchanged a look, but neither said a single, damn word.

"Wrongway?" Came the voice of John Wraith, sounding good and rattled for perhaps the first time in his life. "What you got there?"

No response. Just more chewing. More smacking. Like feet tramping through mud.

"Hell... you find something good? Something we can all share?" Wraith's voice had adopted a placating tone. Silently he motioned for the twins to circle round and flank the man, just in case.

"Ain't sharing." Came a voice that sounded only vaguely like a man they had known. "This one's mine. All mine." McRabe stopped for a second but didn't turn. Then he tucked back in to whatever had his attention. "Hodge was wrong. This is all *your* fault, John. Yours and nobody else's." More chewing, ripping, gulping. "Back in Missouri—that mining town had supplies. Had food. If we'd bought some as was the plan, we'd all be fine right now. But no. Oh no. You had to get all drunk, as usual. Had to kill that loud-mouthed snake-oil man with the limp. *And for what?!* "

McRabe whipped round. He looked like a predator. There were strings of rabbit meat dangling from his mouth. His lips were flecked with what looked like grains of rice. Rice that crawled.

"For nothing, that's what!"

As the man they called Wrongway rose to his feet, the others could see just how off he was. His skin, yellow. The lines of his skull, far too prominent. His eyes contained undeniable madness but also stark, raving truth.

“Make no mistake,” McRabe drew the back of one arm across his mouth, “we *are* in hell… but it wasn’t us who wandered in. Crooms has it backwards. You, John Wraith, you stupid son of a bitch, you lead hell to us! Invited Perdition to share our fucking fire!”

With that, Waylon McRabe shot forward—hands out and grasping like claws.

The first bullet slammed his chest, spun him round, but it was the second one that tore the top of his head off. The man’s body, already in motion, danced all the way to the fire, which accepted the gift without protest.

The old cook, still clutching the skin above his heart, gave a jerking sound, then dropped. And like Jim-Jack Hodge, Jerral Crooms did not get up again. John Wraith had acquired the look of an emperor watching his kingdom burn. He turned for the twins but they were on their horses. Already riding in full gallop for anywhere but there. Apparently, taking out the crazed man in the cavalry greys had been their last official act as members of the Wraith gang.

John dropped—fell hard upon his knees. Bloodshot eyes scanned the ruins of his campsite, absorbing how it had been decorated with the cadavers of men he knew. Just then, he had a sudden and powerful need to retch, but he fought the urge... because he was still him, damn it. Still *Weeping* John Wraith. The white hat with the black heart. Killer of eleven men, six women and two dogs.

“Well… I suppose that’s that.” Came a familiar voice. *“I do appreciate the fire, John… and the company.”*

The stranger stepped past, either ignorant or ambivalent to the slew of freshly dead. In his hand was that damn ugly lizard. It looked down its snout at the man in the white hat, blinking real slow. Seeing this, Wraith’s insides flexed. He lurched forward, clapping both hands over his mouth. His cheeks all puffed out, just like a trumpet player’s.

The stranger gave a whistle, summoning the black horse he had ridden in on. As it clopped nearer to the fire’s light, John could see the beast through hot streaming tears. This was no regular horse. There were no muscles, no meat…. only a charcoal pelt stretched tight over bones. The worst part though, were its eyes, which shimmered like pools of sickly yellow light. With one swift motion, the stranger slid up into the saddle, but before turning to ride off, he looked down—just once more.

“The Judge thinks it’ll be easier if you just let it happen.” A shrug. *“I’d listen to him. Better out than in* , John*.”*

With that, the man’s will simply gave out. In a great series of convulsions, a mass comprised not of bile but fat, buzzing flies was vomited forth. Big and black, they were. Thousands of them. Millions. All pouring from the man’s throat and into the air, a veritable legion—the singular made of many. The drone of it was loud. Maddening. Sufficient by far to drown out the screams of a man called Weeping John Wraith.

Pet Shop of the Gods
by Rob Smales

"May I hilp you, young sahr?"

Mark looked at the old face behind the counter, a mask of wrinkles and oversized Coke bottle glasses on a completely hairless head. Those glasses made the eyes look huge, and their unblinking appraisal made him self-conscious, butterflies the size of Rodan flapping about in his guts as he contemplated talking to this stranger.

He looked down at the glass tank on the countertop—there was a food bowl and one of those plastic hanging water bottle thingies, so there were probably gerbils or mice in there under the cedar shavings, but it appeared empty at the moment—and answered *it* instead.

"I need a pet for school," he mumbled.

In the corner of Mark's eye, the ancient proprietor cupped a long-fingered hand about one tiny, wax-lump ear. "Eh?"

Mark glanced at the figure hunkering over the counter toward him. The specs gave the guy pupils the size of nickels, and all Mark saw were those huge black spots over a tiny nubbin nose—*Those glasses are probably pushing his nose right back into his skull* , he thought—and a lipless slash of a mouth without a hint of a smile. The guy's skin was dark, and that accent... Mark couldn't place it, but the little shopkeeper was definitely not from around here. Under the bespectacled scrutiny, the Rodans in Mark's belly stopped fluttering and moved on to razing Tokyo, and they were getting a serious stomp on. He lowered his head, getting a better angle to maybe spot the mice—or gerbils, or even hamsters—hiding beneath the shavings, coincidentally putting the glass enclosure a bit more between himself and the weird little man. His answer was even more muffled by his nearness to the glass cage.

"My teacher wants me to get a pet for the class." *Damn it, Mrs. Peterson! Why did you have to pick me?*

But he knew why the biology teacher had selected him to choose and care for the class pet. She pulled double duty as a guidance counselor, and her roster happened to contain one Mark Streeter. She knew all about his

troubles with the other kids at Bushy Junior High: the occasional stepped-on lunch or taken lunch money; the period he'd spent in a locker before Julie Buffalino had heard him crying and let him out—to a crowd of laughing jeering faces, of course; the day he'd come out of the locker room without pants, and the time his bookbag had wound up on the auditorium roof.

If you tell me who it was, I can put a stop to it , she'd said. *But if you won't do that, my only advice is to try and fit in a little better. It's not fair, I know, but it's either tell on them, fit in with them, or keep taking their abuse. You understand?*

He understood. He also understood having him do this was her way of trying to help other Bushy students connect with him.

A single ginormous eye peered around the corner of the terrarium, those long, almost tentacular fingers still curving behind an ear like a burnt buttercup, and the nasal voice was louder: "Again?"

Oh, God, this was a mistake.

It had seemed so fortuitous, finding this little shop on his walk home from school—he normally took the bus, but he'd been hiding in the bushes behind the flagpole, avoiding Benny Redmond (he who stepped on lunches and stuffed people in lockers) and his wingmen, Bubba Frederich and Bobby Mann, who were as mean as Benny, but only half as smart. The weird thing was, Mark could have sworn this shop shouldn't have been there. It had always been of those little boutique storefronts that had been closed as long as he could remember, someplace that used to sell musical instruments, or junk—the kind of leftover stock that showed odd, indistinct shapes and shadows when he'd pressed his nose to the grime-covered front window. Eventually, it had become practically invisible, just background he looked right past all the time. He'd never seen any *Under New Management* or *Opening Soon* signs.

Today, though, the window had been lit up—dimly, but still enough to be a surprise—ENTRAIRI'S ETERNAL ENTITY EMPORIUM scrawled across glass that had borne nothing but dust his entire life. Through the filmed and streaky window, he'd seen what looked like a fish tank standing next to a bird cage beside something long and low and covered with a sheet.

A pet shop? Right when I need one?

It had seemed like a gift from God, a sign or whatever. He'd taken the fifty dollars entrusted to him by Mrs. Peterson—there was a *reason* he'd gone to such great lengths to avoid Benny and his thugs—and pushed into the shop.

It seemed bigger on the inside, though that was probably some kind of optical illusion; only half the overhead lights were on, in some random pattern, and with the weird swatches of light and shadow, and the multitude of odd shapes made by tanks, cages, racks, and stands, it was impossible to make out just how big the place actually was. He'd gotten as far as the front counter (no register, but it was the closest counter to the door) before the little old merchant had spotted him.

He sighed, steeled himself, and straightened from his examination of the obviously empty enclosure. "My teacher sent me to get a pet for the class to—"

The weird gnome was gone.

What the—

Long thin fingers gripped his shoulder with a quick strength that startled Mark more than the piping voice that was suddenly right in his ear. "It is an inimal you wish, yis? An inimal for many piples to care for, yis?"

Mark's breath caught, and he turned to find himself face-to-face with the little man—quite literally; at thirteen, Mark was just five feet tall, but the man accosting him was exactly the same height. "You mean an *animal* ?"

The big round lenses dipped once in a sharp nod.

Mark licked his lips. "But... *piples* ?" I'm sorry, I don't under—"

"Piples! Piples!" A finger like a flesh-covered pencil jabbed toward Mark. "One piple." It waggled between the two of them, an elongated *you and me* . "Two piples."

"Two piples? Oh—*people* !"

The lenses dipped again. "Yis. An inimal for many piples to care for, yis? Your cliss at scull?"

An animal for my class at school. Mark realized that in a matter of seconds he'd gone from nervous and gawky to amused and fascinated; as out of place as Mark himself felt every day, this foreign little troll must have felt like he was from another planet. *I guess us nerds have to stick*

together, right? “Yes,” he said, “I need something for my whole cliss—uh, class to take care of.”

The grip left Mark’s shoulder and the proprietor scuttled backward, beckoning frenetically for the boy to follow. “Kim weeth me. Thees way.” The other hand flapped at the tank Mark had been looking into. “Ininsi not for you. Thees way.”

Mark trailed after, moving between a big floor enclosure and a tall, covered birdcage. The enclosure was a square about six feet to a side, with a small privacy shelter in one corner. The rear three-quarters of a muscular black dog stuck out of the shelter, the pooch choosing to snooze with its head protected. Mark gave a cursory look around for the dog’s companions, for though the shelter didn’t look large enough to hide two more dogs, three feed bowls lined the cage’s corner.

He must have sold them already , he thought absently, distracted by the light leaking from beneath the heavy birdcage covering. It was strange, he knew, for a birdcage to have a nightlight; a cover was usually to *block out* light, simulating night and keeping the occupants calm. Even stranger, this light flickered, as if there were an open flame under there. He pinched the edge of the heavy blanket between his fingers, intending just to peek—and that quick strong grip that had been upon his shoulder moments ago was locked around his wrist, bony fingers like a cuff of iron.

“No-no. Leave covahd, yis? Leave covahd, much seefah, yis?” He tugged gently, but that grip left no doubt it was a command, not a request.

“Okay, sure. Sorry.”

“Kim. Thees way.”

The shopkeeper led him now, still holding his wrist, but gently. *Leave covered, much* seefah*? Wait—much* safer*?* He glanced back at the birdcage, noticing again the thickness of the covering. *It’s like that fire blanket Mr. Girard showed us in science class. What kind of a birdcage needs a fire blanket to be safe?* He was looking at the flickering light leaking from beneath that covering when the shopkeeper—Mr. Entrairi, he supposed—tugged his wrist to get his attention.

“Thees is for you.” The pinched voice had pride in it now.

The terrarium was small, not half the size of the one on the counter with the ininsi, whatever that was. There was a heat lamp clipped to the top, and a heat rock and little ceramic cave inside nestled into more wood shavings. Coiled on the rock, in probably the warmest spot in the entire

store, lay a snake the length and diameter of one of Mr. Entrairi’s pencillike fingers.

And the snake was beautiful.

Stripes of copper and gold ran the length of the sides, while the back was a brilliant emerald green. There was more gold, a short double line marking the back of the snake’s head and neck, as if the tiny reptile wore a tiny crown.

“Ohh...” At Mark’s sound, the shark’s mouth on the man beside him finally turned its corners upward in a lipless little grin. Mark turned to the shopkeeper, really looking at him for the first time, and realized that maybe the man wasn’t quite so old as he’d thought. What he’d taken for wrinkles were too symmetrical, those on the right side of his features matching up perfectly with those on the left, and seemed more like... well like *creases* now, like the ones on the Michelin Man, though smaller and finer. That was weird—really weird—but what was on his mind right then was the beautiful little snake.

“What is it?”

The strange little man rattled off a string of syllables that sounded like *kitten cattle* . Mark wasn't sure what that was, but he didn't care; he'd worry about deciphering the funny accent later. There were *much* more important questions to ask right then.

“How much is it?”

“How much you goot?”

Mark had never actually haggled in his life, but he knew roughly how it worked, and that only a fool let the other guy know what they had in their pocket. Nevertheless, when the tiny serpent lifted its head to gaze up at him, gold and copper rippling along its sides, he heard himself say, “Mrs. Peterson gave me fifty dollars.”

“You in luck! *Cattle* fifty dollahs.”

Excitement surged through Mark—followed immediately by bitter disappointment. “Oh. Well, if the snake is fifty, I'll have to keep looking. I'd need the tank and stuff, and all I have is the—”

Mr. Entrairi waved an arm. “Whole setup. Tank, rook, hater, *cattle* , all fifty dollahs.”

“Are you serious?”

The lenses dipped, the eyes behind them gleaming.

In a heartbeat, Mark handed over the small envelope of cash he'd been given. It disappeared into a pocket, or maybe up Entrairi's sleeve, Mark didn't see—and it occurred to him later that the odd salesman never *counted* it—and then Entrairi was unplugging the lamp and rock and thrusting the entire terrarium into Mark's arms.

"Wait," Mark said, the shopkeeper's hurry both confusing and exciting, but he had *questions* , dammit. "What does it eat?"

"Clickets." A small carton marked LIVE INSECTS plunked onto the terrarium's lid. "Clicket or two, every coupla dahs. Get biggah, eat mouse. Get biggah, eat rat. Get biggah"—long-fingered hands urged Mark past the covered birdcage and sleeping dog so fast he didn't have time to be curious—"cattle *tell* you what he want."

Approaching the front counter, Mark saw a paper card, brown with age, hanging from the side of the ininsi cage with thick, yellowed tape: ANANSI.

Well, ininsi *was* close, Mark thought. *Still, I wonder what an ANANSI is?* He was propelled past, again too fast to stop and check anything out—though there was movement in the corner of the tank, a fist-sized *something* rising through the chaff. Though brown and fuzzy, it wasn't a mouse, or a gerbil, or even a hamster; Mark got the impression of *far* too many legs—and then he was on the sidewalk, a rapidly written receipt tucked between two fingers, the wee shopkeeper slipping back inside behind the swiftly closing door.

Click.

* * *

"Where did you get it again?"

"Lafayette Street," Mark said. "The pet shop two doors down from that Lola the Florist place. *Entrairi's Elemental Animals* , or something like that. I forget the name."

Mrs. Peterson frowned in thought. "I think I know where you mean. I thought there was nothing but an abandoned store in there."

Which is exactly what Mom had said when she'd come to pick him up. She'd looked curious, and may have wanted to go investigate the shop, maybe even talk to this man who'd just taken fifty dollars from her son. But the tank's setup had been unplugged for a while by then, the little snake huddling on the rock, soaking up what was left of its warmth. Mark

had become rather urgent about getting home to plug everything in, and when he explained it was all for school his mother relented and pulled the car away from the curb.

And now Mrs. Peterson was peeking into the glass box atop her desk, Mark beside her; the snake lay in its favorite spot on the heat rock. “Well, it certainly is a beautiful animal. What kind is it? Do you remember?”

“Mr. Entrairi has a pretty major accent, but I think he was calling it a *cattle* something. Is there such a thing as a cattle snake?”

“Well, I’ve heard of a cow snake. Maybe he meant that? But I’ve never even heard of a cow snake with this coloring!” She turned to the class, many of the kids leaning far over in their seats, trying to get a better look at the new class pet. “Well? How do you all think Mark did?”

There was an agreeable rumble from the two dozen kids present, punctuated by a couple of sarcastic *yay* s; the junior high equivalent of polite applause. With one exception.

“I can’t see from here,” complained Benny Redmond. Rather than looking positive, like the majority of the kids in the class, Benny’s expression was more akin to *just bit into something sour* , and every time he glanced at Mark, his lips pinched and brows drew together in a *you ain’t all that* frown.

“Well, come up to see. But slowly—he’s not used to all of us yet, and we wouldn’t want to startle our new guest.”

Benny was the first up there, but soon two dozen boys and girls crowded around the small tank, all trying to see the colorful new addition to their class—one that either didn’t notice or didn’t mind all the attention, the little reptile remaining immobile, apparently relaxing upon its rock. There was a third option, that the tiny creature was simply overwhelmed at the sudden sea of faces, but somehow Mark didn’t think so. A few heads turned toward Mark. Phrases like *cool, man* and *good job* and *dude* floated his way, though Benny only looked at him with those flat, dangerous eyes.

“Well, Mark,” Mrs. Peterson said. “You chose him, so what do you want to call him?”

Mark had thought about that the previous night, sitting at his desk watching the little serpent coil and uncoil about its warming rock. *Greenie* had been cast aside, as had *Slick* , and *Spot* , and *Emerald* (*Em for short* , he’d thought, but no), and a host of other half-considered ideas. Now

though, with the question asked aloud, a name popped into his head that just felt *right* . “Precious Twi—”

The teacher squinted. “Precious what?”

Mark’s cheeks warmed a bit. “Just Precious.” He’d been about to say *Precious Twin* , which was what had popped into his head, but as he’d said it aloud it had seemed a bit much, the kind of thing to get him maybe stuffed into a locker again.

“Precious,” Mrs. Peterson repeated thoughtfully. “I like it.”

On the other side of the tank, where none of the other kids dared jostle him out of the way, Benny snorted, raising a finger to tap the glass. “What a fag name. It figures you’d give it a fag name, Streetie.”

“That’s enough, Ben,” Mrs. Peterson began. “You can go take your s __”

Moving with a sudden, blurring speed, the tiny creature reared up and struck, all in one lightning-fast movement. If there were fangs, they were too small to see, but the yellow-rimmed mouth was open wide when the miniscule beast collided with the glass precisely where Benny’s fingertip touched the other side. All the kids gasped, but Benny jerked away with a little cry, so quickly the back of his head collided with Jane Fiddlemyer’s face. Jane had been mid gasp, and his skull hitting her open mouth bloodied Jane’s lip while her teeth gouged Benny’s scalp.

“Well,” said the teacher, “I guess Precious is a little defensive of his name.”

“Bitch *bit* me!” Benny rubbed the back of his head, examining the smear of blood on his palm while Jane clasped her lower face and tried to stop crying.

“Enough!” said Mrs. Peterson. “It was an accident. Furthermore, it was *your* accident, and that should teach you to keep your fingers to yourself.” She wrote a note to get Jane and Benny to the nurse, then turned back to Mark. “Well, you’re in charge of Precious. Where would you like to put him? The windowsill? The shelf? I vote shelf; there’s an outlet over there.

As the teacher babbled happily, Mark watched Benny and Jane. Jane went right out to the hall, eager to get some ice, or maybe for professional reassurance that her face wasn’t scarred for life. Benny, however, paused to look back at Mark with a kind of two-fingered pointing gesture. Not like a gun, but a... okay, Mark didn’t know *what* the school’s biggest bully

meant by the gesture. But it had been aimed at him, and he knew it wasn't good.

* * *

"So I'm going to help feed it," Benny sing-songed, "and you're gonna tell Peterson you *want* me to." He leaned forward from his perch on Mark's chest and slapped Mark's cheek. Hard. "Right?"

The after-school bus ride had been fine. Some of the kids had even asked about the new snake in the biology lab, which had been kind of neat. Then he'd gotten off at his stop and Benny had appeared as if from nowhere.

"Hey, Streetie-Sweetie. I wanna talk to you."

Benny's hands had already been curled into fists, leaving no doubt as to what he'd meant by *talk* . Some of the kids who'd asked about Precious had gotten off the bus with Mark, but suddenly everyone was hurrying to get home; no help there. So he'd done what he'd considered the smart thing: he ran. He'd outrun Benny in the past, and this might have been another of those times—until Bubba had popped from the bushes, thrust out a leg, and sent Mark sprawling to the pavement.

And then Mark was in those same bushes, with no hope some passing grownup would see what was happening, lying on his back, arms pinned to his sides and barely able to draw a breath beneath Benny's hundred pounds. He was crying, but not hysterical—not yet—and the fact that Benny and his cronies didn't immediately just start stomping gave Mark hope.

Benny grinned down at Mark, perspective making the bushes above him look like trees against the sky; Benny seemed like a giant, a titan whose head reached the treetops as he strode around meddling in the affairs of men. Benny the titan leaned down to slap Mark's other cheek.

"Are you listening? Pay attention, Streetie, you fucking retard. Your friggin' snake made me look stupid, so you owe me. I get to feed the fucking thing, and you're gonna tell Peterson it was your idea. You don't, we can all do this again tomorrow. And the day after. And the day after." He bounced, his ass digging painfully into Mark's chest, driving even more air out of him. Mark tried to answer, but couldn't; to tell the truth, he was getting pretty light-headed, and was more concerned with taking a breath than anything Benny might be saying.

Then the weight was off and they helped Mark to his feet. Benny stood tall and put a hand on Mark's shoulder. "So, we have a deal?" Gasping, finally drawing that breath he'd been so desperate for, Mark nodded. He wasn't clear, exactly, on everything he'd been saying, but if it kept Benny from sitting on him, kept air moving freely in and out of his lungs, then a little nod was worth it.

"Good."

With practiced speed, the bully jerked Mark forward, burying his other fist so deep in the smaller boy's gut Mark worried it might come out his back. His long-sought-for breath whooshed out as he crumpled to the ground again, gouging rocks and roots going almost unnoticed as he writhed in the dirt, curling around his own personal world of hurt.

"Just a little something to remember this by." Benny beckoned to the others. "Let's go."

Bobby and Bubba each gave Mark a kick as they passed, bruising an arm and a leg, and then they were gone, out on the sidewalk and on their way home with the other kids.

Back in the bushes, Mark drew a single, painful breath, then vomited into the dust.

* * *

Mark stood at Precious's cage as the other kids milled about before class. Rather than coiling on his rock in his usual pose, the snake rose up to look at Mark, not defensively, but regarding him intently.

You are the coolest, most beautiful thing I've ever seen , thought Mark.

Precious merely flicked his tongue.

Recalling how the tiny reptile had struck at Benny, he slowly extended a forefinger and touched the tank. Inside the enclosure, Precious just as slowly stretched out to gently nose the other side of the glass. He looked larger today, thicker than a pencil, and maybe half again as long.

The Precious Twin, that's what I really *thought. And you wouldn't hurt me, would you? You only snapped at Benny because you can tell he doesn't like you. He doesn't think you're beautiful with your bands of color, and he doesn't—*

"Mark, before we get started, Precious has had a day to get used to us. Why don't you see if he'll eat? That'd be a sign he's adjusting to his new home."

Mark looked around; the classroom door was closed and everyone was seated, most twisted about to look at him. Had the bell rung and he'd totally missed it? He thought back for a moment, trying to recall the strident ringing, even just as background noise, but all he saw in his mind's eye were two tiny golden eyes. He was still thinking about those eyes when Mrs. Peterson spoke again.

"Where are you going, Benny?"

Benny Redmond had risen to his feet. "I just thought I'd help Streeter feed the snake." He turned and looked at Mark, eyebrows raised and waiting. *So I'm going to help feed it* , Benny had said. *And you're gonna tell Peterson you* want *me to.* Mark could still feel the sting of the slaps, taste the vomit at the back of his throat. But there was something else Benny had said, almost offhandedly, as if he'd not even been aware of the admission: *Your friggin' snake made me look stupid, so you owe me.* He thought of the way Benny had glared at him—and Precious—after Precious had scared him in front of the whole class. *Benny doesn't want to feed him, he wants to* hurt *him.*

"Do you need any help, Mark?" asked Mrs. Peterson.

Without a thought for the consequences, for the future under-the-bushes beatings that would surely come his way, thinking only of Precious, and how beautiful and small he was, and how there was no way he was going to let a big thug like Benny Redmond actually *hurt* him, Mark answered: "No, thanks. I think I got it."

Benny's expression shifted from expectant to shocked, and he simply stood there a minute before it penetrated that the whole class was watching. He sank slowly to his seat, expression turning quickly to anger, and Mark tasted vomit again when, back to the teacher, the mountainous eighth-grader clearly mouthed five words: *I'm gonna fuck you up* .

* * *

"He's gonna kill me," Mark murmured.

The snake made no reply that Mark could hear, though he took comfort in Precious's simple, quiet presence. Mrs. Peterson had called Mark to her room on his lunch period and pointed out it was Friday, and they'd made no provision as yet for Precious's weekend care.

"If you'll take him—I mean, if it's all right with your parents—I can give you a ride after school. That's a lot of stuff to try to get on and off the

bus. What do you say?”

He’d said yes of course, immediately, then gone down to the office to make an official call to his mother for permission. Mom had been a little leery, assuming that eventually *she’d* be the one taking care of the serpent on the weekends, but Mark hadn’t taken no for an answer. He wanted to care for Precious, and the thought of anyone *else* doing it, even Mrs. Peterson, well, it made him feel kind of... weird.

Besides, if Mrs. Peterson gave him a ride, he’d avoid whatever shrubbery party Benny had planned for him. At least for a while. So he’d gotten the tank and its various heaters home safely and spent the afternoon in his room setting things up and making sure Precious liked his new surroundings. Then Mark had gathered the courage to try coaxing the small snake onto his hand. He’d begun nervously, spurred by thoughts of holding the snake in class, surrounded by admiring classmates. But the little creature had readily slithered into his palm, scales slick and dry rather than slimy, and still carrying the radiance of the electric rock.

His usual Friday night routine was to watch YouTube vids or maybe something on Netflix, and though he took a seat in front of his laptop, and videos did play, he never really *watched* any of them. His eyes constantly strayed to the emerald newcomer coiled loosely in his open hand. He studied the intricate scales that fit the snake so well, admired their pattern, felt their warmth—and though he knew Precious was cold blooded, and should really do no more than absorb his own heat, the little serpent felt *warm* .

Before he knew it, Mom was touching his shoulder, reminding him that even though it was the weekend, he still needed to go to bed. Her eyes widened, startled at the snake lying upon Mark’s palm, and he remembered that so far as she had known, he wasn’t even picking Precious up, never mind watching YouTube with him. Holding him had quickly become so comfortable it felt like Mark’d always done it.

* * *

“Are you feeling okay?”

Mark looked up from his untouched Monday morning breakfast; Mom wore a troubled expression. “I’m just tired. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Which was a half truth. At best. He hadn’t slept well Friday or Saturday night either, though last night *had* been the worst of it. It wasn’t

that he had trouble falling asleep. He could do that in a heartbeat. But once he was asleep, there were *the dreams* .

They'd woken him Friday, though he hadn't been able to remember them. Not at first. But Saturday night, he'd been able to remember a bit: screaming and singing (maybe they were the same thing in the dreams, he wasn't quite sure); short, brown-skinned people all around him; floating, golden eyes that seemed to peer into his very soul. It was all vaguely disturbing, and he'd woken up Sunday morning not feeling very rested. Then last night...

The brown people had been there again, all about him and staring. He'd had a club—more like a mace, with a serious weight at the end—and been swinging it vigorously. And there had been blood. Lots of it, splashing a flat stone like red rain, far more than in any horror movie Mom had yet to let him see. But—and this was the weirdest part—the dream hadn't had a horror movie feel to it.

Oh, there had been violence, and torrents of blood, but though he woke not feeling rested, there was no sense he'd been having nightmares. There had been no waking midscream, or sweat-soaked sheets. The dreams hadn't been *bad* , exactly, just... busy. And through it all he remembered those golden eyes.

It was only a whim that caused him to take Dad's little souvenir baseball bat from the den. Later on, he'd blame the dreams and the club he'd been wielding in them, but there was really no thought involved; the idea just popped into his head from somewhere, and he'd tucked the eighteen-inch bat into his backpack before Mom had driven him to school with Precious's tank in the back seat.

* * *

"Hey, Streetie-Sweetie."

It had been a terrific Monday. He'd brought Precious into the school and plugged the lamp and rock in while the other kids watched. Some even offered to help, but he had it covered. He was cool. He'd been cool all day. Benny, Bobby, and Bubba had kept their distance, not even bothering to pick on him, and that had been nice, though... predictable.

"Streetie? We wanna talk to you."

Usually, when they *didn't* pick on him, that was a sign they were saving it up for later, trying to lull him into a false sense of security. It was

no surprise at all to step off the bus at his stop and find Benny waiting for him. He'd avoided his beating on Friday, had he not? It was only logical, in their way of thinking, that he get an even worse one Monday. Mark felt no surprise or fear when he turned and fled down the sidewalk, only a strange sense of... was that anticipation?

Whatever. He ran easily, in control rather than panic, his backpack slung over one shoulder instead of both. His right hand slipped inside as he loped along, and when Bubba stepped from the bushes to trip him up, it came out holding his father's miniature bat. The bat went high as he dodged aside, the maneuver feeling practiced—and hadn't he practiced all weekend, lashing about with that club in his dreams?—and came down hard and fast, with all the force Mark could muster.

Bubba sounded like the steam whistle in Mom's old-fashioned coffee pot when his kneecap shattered beneath the blow. The boy fell as Mark danced to a stop, balanced lightly on the balls of his feet as if he'd done this a hundred times before. At the swing of the bat, the feeling of the dreams had come back to him, the sense of *rightness* that had kept his weekend from being filled with nightmares. In his mind, golden eyes watched him with love and approval, and a thought came to him, from *somewhere else* , and the dream feeling kept this from being frightening too.

Do it. Do it for me. In my name.

Mark stepped forward and raised the bat, gaze fixed on the crown of the helpless boy's skull.

"What the fuck? What the fuck are you *doing* ?"

The shout, loud and close, snapped Mark out of it. Sort of. It was still with that odd feeling of *rightness* that he turned to face Benny and Bobby. Benny started for Mark while Bobby ran to the screaming kid sprawled across the sidewalk. Mark raised the little bat with a shout of his own: "In the name of the feathered serpent!" He recognized the phrase as something from his dreams, something he'd forgotten until right then, and though part of him thought *Wow,* that's *fucking stupid* , that feeling of rightness was so strong he didn't hesitate as he stepped forward to meet Benny.

But Benny did.

"What are you, crazy? Look what you—I mean what... you're fucking dead, Streetie. Fucking *dead* ." Benny shouted. Benny postured. But Benny

didn’t get any closer to Mark than he had to before Bobby started hollering for him to come help.

Mark left them huddled on the sidewalk, some of the other kids looking on from the bus stop. He held onto the bat for the first block or so, then tucked it into his pack. Thinking about what had happened without being in the heat of the moment, he was more than a little horrified. He might have crippled Bubba. Or it could have all gone wrong. They could have taken the bat away from him and then *he* would have been the one screaming on the sidewalk.

But they didn’t , came the thought. *And you weren’t. And didn’t it just feel... right?*

It had. It had felt as right as the blood splashing the stone in his dreams, so he didn’t question it. He was halfway home before he realized it didn’t matter *what* he’d shouted at Benny in all the excitement, or how silly it had sounded in his head because... well, he hadn’t actually been shouting in *English* , had he?

And somehow, that felt right too.

* * *

The next day he brought Precious home for good.

He’d been showing off before class, wearing the tiny creature like a jeweled bracelet before the bell rang. The other kids watched from a distance. They’d kept Bubba Frederich in the hospital after putting his knee back together. He’d told the EMTs he’d been running, slipped, and gone down on the cement straight on his kneecap. That was the unwritten rule, and everybody knew it: telling a grown-up was tattling, and it was pussy, and it wasn’t done. Even Mark followed the rule, telling his mother he’d fallen the other day as well, rather than explain about the beating in the bushes.

But enough kids had seen from the bus stop for the story to make the rounds before school. They hung back, eyeballing him but not quite daring to ask him about it. He’d put Precious away and sauntered—*sauntered* —back to his seat when he heard Benny Redmond’s voice.

“Hey, check it out! *I* can pick up this shitty little snake *too* !”

The tank was open and he was reaching inside when Mrs. Peterson’s voice rang out. “Benny! What’re you doing?”

That *Benny* saved him. He jumped when the voice of authority shouted his name, just as the tiny coiled serpent struck. Benny jerked his hand from the cage with only a single nick from either the upper or lower jaw rather than the double crescent of the snake really latching on. Precious had marked him, though, and that was it for the class pet. Benny wailed about his "snake-bit finger" all the way to the nurse, then while sitting in the office. Then his mother arrived, an angry, bewhiskered fireplug of a woman, making a stink of her own, demanding justice for her poor maimed son.

Christ, you would have thought his arm was torn off , Mark thought as Mrs. Peterson explained the situation. Benny had been trying to take Precious out unsupervised and without permission, but the fact remained that he had attacked and marked a student; he had to go.

"But it's been what, five days?" she said. "You can probably take him back to the shop, right? I mean, so you don't get stuck with him?"

That's exactly what Mom thought when she picked up Mark and Precious and all their gear after school that day. "Back to the store he goes. I'm not getting stuck taking care of that thing—and Mark, you *know* that's what'll happen."

Over Mark's strenuous protests that he *wouldn't* get tired of Precious after a few days, that he *would* take care of the little serpent, Mom had driven to the spot where she'd picked her snake-and-tank-laden son up just five days earlier... only to find a dark, abandoned storefront

Mark pressed his forehead to the glass, hands cupping his face to block out the light. Inside were the same odd shapes he'd always seen while peering in, the objects either in black cases or under sheets; a pair of posters hanging on the opposite wall, one offering guitar lessons, the other extolling the virtues of Simard woodwind reeds, suggesting an abandoned music shop.

Mom was flummoxed. "What the hell?"

"Looks like he has to come with us." Mark utterly failed to sound disappointed.

* * *

"What's going on with you?"

It took effort, but Mark focused on her. He'd always liked Mrs. Peterson. "What do you mean?"

“You haven’t raised your hand all week—and when I’ve called on you anyway, you’ve gotten the answers wrong, even the stuff I know you know. I usually count on you to help me keep the other kids on track, but this week... this week it’s like you’re somewhere else.”

He *had* been somewhere else, at least mentally. But it wasn’t his fault. It was the dreams.

The day Precious had come to live with Mark, those dreams from that first weekend had come to stay as well. Every night as Mark slept, he danced and sang. He’d swung a club, then moved on to a knife, a long-handled thing with a black stone blade. It was obsidian, he knew, though he couldn’t have said *how* he knew, and sharp enough to pierce a breastbone. He’d done it. Many times. Harvesting hearts from still-living breasts to cast into a great flaming brazier. He strode about a sort of stair-step pyramid, gloved to the elbows in blood and calling out orders to small brown-skinned people who obeyed with alacrity. He led them in songs—what he now believed were prayers, because as the days passed he’d begun to derive meaning in the words of his dreams.

And though his dreams *should* have been disturbing, they never bothered him at all. They felt comfortable, actually, even when considered in the light of day.

Just over a week since the little serpent had come to stay, those lidless golden eyes following him in and out of sleep, and he could remember more of the dreams as each day passed. They’d even begun following him *out* of sleep. Mom said he looked tired, and maybe weariness had something to do with it, but it also felt so... comfortable? Right? Good? All of the above, really, when the visions washed over him in school, like waking dreams. And it was hard to pay attention in class when jungle came to him, bringing its pyramids and gloves of blood, and the people singing in praise of the Precious Twin; the Feathered Serpent. Even now, he heard them, all about him as he raised the obsidian dagger high above the sacrifice—a man this time; he’d just done two women in a row... *rider of the wind, bringer of wisdom, with blood we greet you, with blood we entreat you, with blood we thank you for —*

“Mark? Are you listening to me?”

He opened his eyes, realized he was swaying slightly in time with the song in his head, and focused on a very concerned-looking biology teacher.

“Sorry. I just haven’t been sleeping well.”

He turned toward the door before she could reply, escaping her questions and concern. He was fine. Better than fine, he was good. Great.

Besides, even though she called something after him, he barely heard it under the singing and the flutes and the scream as, in his mind, he brought down the knife.

* * *

School grew hazier the following week, as did home. Everything Mark had ever known retreated behind a veil, only seen or heard with effort. His *new* life, what he'd once thought of as dreams, grew more real every day, until—had anyone known what to ask—he would've said it was his dreams that were filled with school, and cars, and people speaking English. *And without the blood* , he might have added. *Without the prayers or blood.*

In his dreams, a phone call from the school caused a ruckus at home. There was a search of his room, a visit to old Doctor Chipman, and peeing into a cup. There was the big stupid boy, Benny, and his sidekick Bobby, coming after him with clubs—one a mere tree branch, the other a sawn-off hockey stick—at the bus stop before school, shouting about seeing how Mark liked it. Without even the pretext of running, Mark had pulled Mom's kitchen knife from his pack, the one she'd ordered after seeing it cut a can in half on television, then slice a tomato so thin you could read a newspaper through it. It was nearly as long as their clubs.

He'd slashed both of them—Benny twice, one of them quite deep—before they'd run off. Mark had given chase, drums and prayers pounding in his ears, the voice of his own little god in the tank riding over all: *Kill them for me! Give them to me! Their hearts, their blood, for me!*

But though Mark had outrun them in the past, the situation was reversed, and fear gave their feet wings. He stumbled to a halt, bloodstained blade in hand, disappointment swelling in his heart—though whether it was his own or came from the little being whose voice rode in his head, he couldn't say. Truth be told, it no longer seemed to matter.

You should have run them down , said the Precious in his mind.

"Isn't the stuff in the real world enough?" Mark whispered. "You want blood even in this stupid dream with TV and school?"

I am diminished. Where once I had thousands, there is now only you. The blood and hearts must ride the smoke, that I regain my power. It is what I wish. It is what I require.

Mark thought a moment, focusing on this dream world, its people and places, then smiled. “How about I take you to a place where there are a hundred hearts? Two hundred. Maybe more.”

Excitement poured from the little serpent, who grew so much faster in his head than in that tank. He tamped it down, thinking of the two boys—wounded boys—outrunning him in the street.

The kids at Bushy Junior High wouldn’t even be wounded.

Not yet.

“I’ll need something from home first. And you, Quetzalcoatl. And you.”

Mark knew of something that could outrun any kid. It was locked away, but he knew where his father kept the key.

And he was pretty sure he knew how to load it.

* * *

Eric and Dylan pressed their noses to the glass tank, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever hid in the cedar shavings.

“Man,” said Eric, “this place is weird.”

“*Finding* it was weird,” said Dylan. “I mean, you ever seen this place before?”

“Uh-uh. And I go by here all the time.” Eric glanced away from the tank to look at his friend. “Maybe they just set up super fast?”

Dylan shrugged, still studying the enclosure. “Dunno. Lucky for us, though.”

“May I hilp you, young sahrs?”

Eric looked up to see a little old man, barely up to his shoulder, peering at him through thick round lenses.

“We need something,” Dylan said. “For the high school. We’re supposed to get a pet for the bio lab.”

“It is an inimal you wish, yis? An inimal for many piples to care for, yis?”

A wide, shiny smile broke out beneath the insanely thick glasses and oddly miniscule nose, and long, pencil-like fingers beckoned the boys deeper into the little emporium almost greedily.

“Kim weeth me, thees way. I have jist what you need.”

St. Scholastica's Home for Children of the Sea

by Emma J. Gibbon

I was barely out of childhood myself when I started working at St. Scholastica's. I did not have much use for school, not being academically inclined. I'd missed much being the eldest daughter of a house full of children that I had to help my mother look after. My father was either at the mill or at the drink, so when Mother Gentiana told my mother that she needed help at the orphanage, I was sent within the week. I would be clothed, fed, and my wages sent home. My next sister along could take over my duties.

My mother took me to one side the night before I left. "It'll be strange at the orphanage. You'll see and experience things different to what it's like here in the village," she said.

"I know, mother. I know that Mother Gentiana keeps things separate. I know I'll be away from you all."

"It's not just that," she said. "Those kids," she paused. "Those kids'll need all your love and attention. They'll be…different. You've heard the tales. But you pay no mind to that, remember we're all children in God's eyes, deserving all the same. I hope I brought you up to remember that."

I reached out and held her hand. "You have, mother. I hope I'll do you proud."

"I know you will," she said and kissed my forehead.

The next day, Mother Gentiana herself came to drive me to the orphanage in her battered truck. The Mother was a tall, hawkish woman dressed in overalls and work boots. Her only concession to her station was the traditional wimple and veil she wore to cover her head. We barely spoke during the two hour drive through the woods and into the hills. She asked me facts: how many brothers and sisters I had, where we worshipped, if at all, where I had gone to school and been born. She offered no information about herself.

St. Scholastica's was an iron-gray, domineering building at the top of a hill hidden by trees. It was high enough that when the wind hit right, you could smell the sea in the air. At first look I assumed it to be stone, but as I stood underneath its looming walls, I could see it was the regular old shingles we all had on our houses, just forgoing the usual New England white. It was different up here. I felt enclosed by the pines and sensed a thousand faces peering at me from the blank windows. Mother Gentiana took a massive iron key out of her pocket to unlock the door and ushered me in, shouldering my heavy bag alone. "Let me show you your room," she said, and I followed her up the narrow staircase.

I didn't mind the orphanage. The work was hard, but no harder than I had to work at home. No schoolwork to bother me, and a luxury I had never dreamed of: my own room. They kept me away from the children at first. I suppose they thought I needed time to adjust; to get used to living away from home before showing me the true nature of my charges. They needn't have worried. As far as I was concerned, the children were loves. I had a natural aptitude for soothing babes and they were no different in that respect. Besides, I had an affection for outsiders. Our poverty and my parents' moral disintegration had made us outcasts of a sort in the village and I had already heard the stories, we all had. In fact, I was eager to see one of the orphanage's residents after I had heard so much about them. My large and strong body was soft and matronly, and my low voice meant for crooning. I found my place there at St. Scholastica's. Others were not so lucky.

I'll never forget the first time I got the smallest glimpse of one of the children. I had been charged with carrying some laundered linens to the top floor of the orphanage, where the smallest babes were. It was a job I often got, being one of the strongest. The top corridor was one of the darkest, with no natural light and lower ceilings than the rest of the house. Gaslights flickered in sconces along the dark walls, barely lighting the way. There was no electricity up here. But I admit that this was my favorite part of the orphanage, there was always quiet up here, you rarely heard any crying.

The darkness and closeness gave a cocoon-like feeling. I stopped at the end door and knocked. I knew I wasn't allowed to go into the rooms yet. I placed the laundry basket on the floor. I was about to leave and walk back down the corridor when I heard a loud thump coming from inside the

room. It was the sound of something heavy and wet smacking onto the floor, hard enough that it reverberated through the floorboards under my feet. I then heard a cute little giggle, a baby laugh, and the nursemaid exclaim “Oh, you little bugger! Fast as bleeding lightning!”

“Is everything ok?” I shouted through the door. I could hear a strange noise, a slithering across the floor and footsteps after it.

“We’re fine, love,” said the nursemaid, out of breath. “Don’t dally. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said and turned to go. There was no way I wanted to get in trouble with Mother Gentiana. Before I left, the door opened slightly and the creak of it caused me to turn back around. A tiny little limb snaked through the crack in the door, a purple limb that had suckers running all along its underside. It reared up and waved at me. There was that little chortle again.

“Oh no, you don’t,” said the nursemaid, her voice just on the other side of the door. “It’s time for your dinner.” I heard a grunt as the nursemaid picked up something heavy and the little limb slipped back inside the door.

For the most part, my early days at the orphanage were grunt work. I carried laundry and put wood on the fire, I picked potatoes in the field next door and washed vegetables by the bucket-load. I did not go to the village or visit my family for over a year. I did not mind. I was built for the work. It was tiring. I worked all day and flopped into my bed after dinner. Mother Gentiana kept me apprised of my family, so I knew there was no cause to worry beyond the usual. I would venture to say I was satisfied rather than happy, but that was to change.

The only dark spot in my days was Lucia. Lucia was another girl who had started working at St. Scholastica’s six months before I had. Lucia was spiteful and mean, there was no other way to put it. Tall and red haired with doughy, freckled arms, the only reason she didn’t pick on me outright was because I matched her in size. That didn’t mean she couldn’t snipe, snipe, snipe at me constantly. She criticized my work, my looks, my voice, my very existence. I never heard a nice word escape from her lips. My only consolation was that she was exactly the same with everyone else. She disliked every single one of us. I wondered if she even liked herself. I worried that she behaved the same way with the children. I overheard one of the nursemaids ask Mother Gentiana why she had brought Lucia to St. Scholastica’s. Her reply was vague; “Sometimes a person’s situation is so

dire that you have a calling to save them, whether they deserve it or not, or are grateful." She could not be coaxed into saying anything further.

It was because of Lucia that I was finally able to see the children, earlier than perhaps Mother Gentiana had intended, and while the circumstances were not the best, especially for Lucia, I cannot deny that being closer to the children made me happier.

Bath day was always a big day at St Scholastica's. It only happened once a month, and usually I was sent downstairs to the kitchen to begin to soak and wash the towels after they had been used. It was hard, slimy work and I did not relish it. It was a relief then when Mother Gentiana asked me to take more soap upstairs to the bathroom. I was to leave it outside the door, as I did with the laundry, and come straight back down.

I had told no one of the little limb I had seen earlier that month. I went up the stairs to the washrooms and placed the soap, as instructed, on the floor outside the door. It was then I heard Lucia screech, her tone as angry and as nasty as usual. "Don't you…Don't you dare!" There was a splash of water on the floor and a giggle. Lucia bellowed. "You little freak! I told you not to!" There was a loud slap. "That'll teach you," she snarled. Then Lucia began to make another noise, a noise I had never heard a human make before, an unearthly noise. The only thing I could compare it to is the sound of a pig screaming when it knows it is going to the slaughter, only much, much worse.

Lucia's screams echoed through St. Scholastica's and Mother Gentiana and an army of nursemaids came running to her aid. I was pushed aside in the rush. I slammed against the wall and slid to sit on the wooden floor. I stayed put, unable to put together the sounds that I was hearing, squelching and slithering and things breaking, Lucia's cries getting weaker and weaker. The Mother and the maids were too late. When they finally pulled Lucia out of there, there was nothing left of her face, just bloody pulp where her fierce frown had been. Most of her bones were clearly broken and a rash of livid sucker marks pocked her skin.

That night, I sat on the hearth of the fireplace in the kitchen. The cook had made me some hot milk to help me sleep, but I was unsure that I would ever rest easy again. Lucia's screams echoed in my head and every time I closed my eyes, the image of her broken body swam inside the darkness of my eyelids. Mother Gentiana came in and sat on the rocking chair by the fire. I could see by the way she sank into the cushion and

closed her eyes that she was bone-tired and heartsick but as the cook passed her a mug of milk, she opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Did you ever have a cat at home, Mercy?” It was the first time she had ever called me by my name.

“Yes, Mother,” I said, “Tabby, she was my mother’s.”

“And was Tabby a mouser?” She said.

“Aye, she was quite the huntress. She’d get mice, and birds, voles and a salamander once.”

Mother Gentiana nodded. “Did she eat her kills?”

“No, she left them as presents, usually for my mother. Sometimes they weren’t quite dead. My mother said she was contributing to the household.”

Mother Gentiana gave me a weary smile. “Your mother was right. It’s a sad thing though, to see the little broken bodies, yes?”

I nodded. “Mother always wanted me to throw them in the woods but I couldn’t. I gave them a proper burial.”

“You didn’t blame the cat though? It was just following nature.”

I nodded. “It’s what they do.”

“Cats,” she said, “and especially kittens, are cute little things but they are predators. They murder by instinct. The same goes for the children here, Mercy. It’s in their nature, their being. It’s part of their survival instinct. Lucia hurt them, threatened them, so they reacted on instinct. Are you scared of cats, Mercy?”

“No.”

“You have no reason to be scared of the children either. They are babes still, innocents. When they grow older, they will go to the sea where they will have to kill to survive. But that is in the future. Right now they are in our care and it is our duty to look after them. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mother Gentiana.”

The Mother rose from her chair, the wood creaking, and reached her hand out to me. “Come on, it’s time you met the children.”

I took her hand and followed her to the dormitories. As we walked up the creaking stairs, she said, “The children are still quite upset about today’s incident, so we have put them all in the same dormitory. They tend to feel safer together.”

“Where’s Lucia?” I said.

“We buried her in the woods. If anyone asks, she ran away with a boyfriend and we don’t know where she is.”

I wonder if it had been anyone other than the hated Lucia, I would have cared more, but I don’t think so. Even then, before I had met them, my sympathies were with the children. I would never be able to explain it, but I suspect Mother Gentiana knew. Otherwise she would have said more, tried to convince me to keep quiet. She knew I wouldn’t tell and we never spoke of the lie again, although Lucia was, of course, all tied up in what came after.

The dormitory was warm and smelled of babies, newborns, that distinctive smell when you put your face to the still forming crown of their head. It is an intoxicating smell, and the air was full of it. It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the dim light of the gas lamps but when they did, I could see the room was full. There were tiny beds and cots and bassinettes everywhere, the room a sea of worn linen and children.

The children were all different sizes, from newborns in the nursemaids’ arms to older babies, toddlers, right up to little girls and boys around five years old. All of them had something that made them not quite human, something that bound them to the sea. Many of them had octopus limbs instead of legs, others had tentacles instead of arms, many had beaks, others again had appendages on the lower potions of their faces. At least one had a mouthful of shark teeth and another with the light of an angler fish and yet, they were all human enough for me to recognize how young they were, big blue and brown eyes, tiny hands and downy hair. Those that could smile at me did, with baby teeth missing or not grown in yet. Mother Gentiana pushed me ahead.

“Go on then, say hello.” I walked among them, touched their little hands and stroked their heads, waved at the shy ones and told them my name. One of the nursemaids handed me a baby and I knew it was the one I had seen that day. He wrapped one of his little purple limbs around my wrist and laid his head against my chest as he sucked his thumb. They called him John. How to explain how I felt at that moment? Lucia was forgotten, and I knew that I would do anything in my power to protect and care for these children.

After that, St. Scholastica’s truly became my home and happiness. I was Mother Gentiana’s protégé. She showed me all of the workings of the orphanage, from the kitchens to the laundry to the garden and the grounds.

She had originally been from the village, like me, whereas the cook and the stable boy had come from other parts of Maine. The nursemaids came from over the sea, Ireland and the north of England mostly. I asked her whether I should take vows and she said not. “I took mine before we knew of this,” she swung her arm towards the orphanage. “It’s clear that there is more to this world than what is in that dusty book, but don’t tell anyone I said that.” She winked at me. “What matters is what’s in your heart.”

What was is my heart was those children. It was as if I had been cracked open at the core and they were the light that was let in. In addition to my practical chores of making sure they were fed, clean and rested, I played with them and cuddled them, rocked them when they were sleepy and wiped away their tears when they were hurt. My especial favorite was John. He would slide over to me as soon as I entered the room and pull at my skirts to be picked up. I spent many a day doing my work with him at my hip. I didn’t mind, I never minded. I tried not to think of the day when they would leave for the sea.

“They’ll be other children,” said Mother Gentiana. “There’s always more.”

When it was clear I was going to stay, Mother Gentiana allowed me to come down to the village to get supplies and visit my family. My stay with my folks was brief. “You’ve changed, girl,” slurred my father as he walked out the door, the smell of grain alcohol following him. I could see that he hadn’t. My mother was pleased to see me, and I was heartened to witness my sisters and brothers growing up more responsible than my parents, frankly. As I made my way to leave, my mother caught my arm.

“I can see by how well and happy you look that I did the right thing sending you up there,” she said, “I stand by what I said before you left. But be careful, things are changing here. Not everyone thinks of that place and the poor souls in it like I do, and there’s been talk in the village since that girl disappeared. Her folks have been stirring up some bad feelings. I worry for you all.” I patted her arm and kissed her cheek and told her I would but I wasn’t worried. Surely everyone knew that Lucia was trouble. I would have been surprised if her parents were any better or taken seriously. I’d lived in the village all my life. I knew most were good people at heart.

Later that day, I was at the store with the Mother. I could feel someone’s stare boring into my back and as I turned to go, a weak looking

man with strawberry blond hair and dark circles under his eyes spat on the floor in front of us. Mother Gentiana ushered me out. When we got to the truck, I asked her who it was.

“Lucia’s father. Best to stay away from him. He means us ill.” I said nothing on the drive back to what was now my home, the orphanage. I forgot all about the man in the village. Even a letter from my brother couldn’t break the spell, the sense of security I felt. I was wrong:

Mam doesn't know this, but the rest of us think you should come back home. There's been a lot of talk in the village. Lucia's dad, he's been very loud. He's got some big shots from Boston backing him up. They're saying that it is unnatural for those...things to exist. They're saying we shouldn't be looking after them. They're monsters, Mercy. They should be exterminated. Come back. We, your brothers, can protect you then. If you don't, then you're one of the monsters too.

I dismissed the letter. I was angry at my brother for patronizing me and got back to work.

A month or two went by, but then the stable boy showed up from a trip to the village battered and beaten, clutching a ripped poster in his hands. He showed it to Mother Gentiana as we hustled to get warm soapy water to clean the cuts on his arms and face. “The boys from the village got me when I ripped it down,” he said, “they said that they were going to tell the men. That I would be sorry. Mother, I’m sorry to bring this on you, on us all. I just couldn’t stand to see them call the children monsters.”

Mother Gentiana gave a heavy sigh. “It’s not your fault. It was only a matter of time. They were looking for an excuse.”

“What’s going on?” I said.

“There are certain…groups,” she said, “factions, who disagree with our work. They dress it as faith, but it’s not. It’s money and politics and havoc to them.” She handed me the poster. There was a cartoon monster on it, devouring human children.

Join us for a village supper, it said. *We’re here to help you with your monster problem. Tired of sharing your home with dark beasts? Find a sympathetic ear with us. Join us. We will fight for you. We will fight for your children. We will protect your interests. We are of the Faith.*

Mother Gentiana sighed again. “I wonder how they found us. They usually turn up in larger towns and cities.”

“Lucia’s father,” said the stable boy, “went all the way to Boston to get them. Her mother told me.” He nodded his head towards me, “Though she said she couldn’t be seen talking to me. Feelings were running high, she said.”

“They won’t do anything to us,” I said. “The village. The orphanage has always been here. No one’s ever minded.”

“People change their minds,” said Mother Gentiana. She walked to the closet under the stairs where we kept coats and overshoes. After rustling in the back, she pulled out a shotgun. “Bed the animals down,” she said to the stable boy, “then come back here and make sure we’re all locked up. We have to be ready, just in case.”

I would like to say that nothing came of it. I would like to say that my assessment of the village, of the people I had known all my life, was correct. But I was wrong, and just after the meeting must have ended, they arrived in their trucks and cars. Flaming torches just like the angry villagers of old stories, ready to take on the monsters. I didn’t recognize all of them, perhaps they were men from out of town who made up most of the mob but the rest, I did. I was endlessly relieved that none of my kin were there, but there was Lucia’s father, at the fore, his face twisted in hate.

“If you only knew what that man had done to his own daughter whom he professes to miss so much,” said the Mother. “Take the children upstairs,” she said to the nursemaids. We waited for the hammering on the door. It wasn’t long. The door splintered like firewood and they surged into the room like a dangerous tide. The stable boy tried to fight, but he was already injured. It took a couple of men mere seconds to overwhelm him. Mother Gentiana managed to shoot one before being knocked over, her head ringing on the stone hearth. She didn’t move, her skin the color of mushrooms, so I grabbed the gun and ran up the stairs after the men, the cook screaming behind me.

How did they know where the children would be? A lucky guess, a traitor in our midst? We would never know, but they headed straight to the dorm where all the babes were. They crashed through the door even more easily than they had the first. Some were not as brave as they supposed themselves to be, taking flight as soon as they saw our children, running down the stairs like frightened rabbits. Others disgust soon transformed to murderous hate. Lucia’s father made a grab for John and I shot the man

dead. I confess no remorse for this murder. John reached out to me and I grabbed him and held him close. Of course, this focused the men's attention on me, and they came at me, throwing the brave nursemaids who tackled them out of the way.

Then there was a change in the air. A high pitched hum came from deep in John's throat. All of the children responded to it and joined in the noise. The sound got louder and louder, filling the room. It was all the sign they needed. It was as when they retaliated on Lucia, except much, much more. They moved fast, faster than I had ever seen them move, and they were on the men before the men knew what hit them.

The weapons the men had, pistols, knives and torches, were useless at such speed. By the time they tried to draw them, limbs and tentacles had torn them out of their hands. It was then the real massacre happened, quickly, a frenzy. The children used their monstrous tools to tear those men apart, limb from limb. Blood was a mist that filled the room. A fine spray covered the linens. Deadly suckers held on fast as they dislocated joints and broke bones, those with beaks and those with teeth rended flesh and tendon. In no time at all there was little left of the men who had invaded our home.

When they were done, they all gathered behind me. Hiding behind my skirts like the children they were. "It's ok," I soothed, "You had to protect us. You did what is in you to do. Remember this when you go to the seas." I turned to the nursemaids. "If any of you want to go, go now but you can never come back." They all stayed still. I stumbled down the stairs still carrying John. Mother Gentiana was alive. Insensible, but breathing.

I found one of the men from the group cowering in the kitchen.

"Your friends are dead," I said, "Go to the village. Tell them the men are gone. Tell them that it is my duty to look after these children and that we will continue to do so. Tell them not try this again." I pushed him out of the doorway. "What are you looking at?" I asked those assembled. "The Mother needs help and we have an orphanage to run. It's way past the children's bedtime."

I smiled at John. I wiped a smear of blood from his tiny cheek. He smiled back at me. I was home indeed.

The Mass of the Greatest Sin
by Trisha J. Wooldridge

She didn't expect the tiny tentacle—or arm. It moved too quickly for her to identify if it had suckers.

Arms have suckers on the whole thing; tentacles have suckers only on the end , she reminded herself. Also, *fuck you, overactive imagination.*

No matter how many times she blinked, she still saw it—that coil, snapping in and out like her nail was some trapdoor. And she'd felt it.

During her freshman year of college, her family had won a trip to Hawaii. It had been their first vacation since she was a child. At an octopus farm they visited, one of the babies had wrapped around her finger. A tiny, curious squeeze—the smallest hug. Octopi were smart; researchers and keepers shared stories about their empathy. Recently, some article suggested cephalopods had alien DNA.

She pulled out the memory of that tiny hug every so often, whenever she needed it.

Like today. It was Monday and time for her annual physical. She'd had to take the T because her car was in the shop.

"Move, you fat bitch." The laughter hurt as much as the words.

Her face burned like the bile in her stomach; the burning enhanced, rather than competed, with the pain of squishing against the unforgiving pole and handle of the seat row's end.

As the three guys laughed, they spread across the four seats making up the bench. The guy beside her kept rubbing his leg against hers. Laughing each time, making it clear she was taking up too much space.

It was the worst sin: to be a woman and fat.

The unwanted touching, the humor of touching *someone like her* , that was her penance.

Only freaks took pleasure in touching *someone like her* . Chubby chasing was a taboo fetish, an episode's plot point on every fucking police procedural or courtroom drama. *Fat* wasn't normal. *Fat* shouldn't exist.

Every train seat, bus seat, and doctor's office chair bore that truth into her flesh.

Her car's front tie-rods had needed replacement. The mechanic said they'd worn out early, sometimes caused by poor weight distribution in the car. That sounded like bullshit, but she didn't know any other mechanic. She'd given him the money—or rather her not-quite-maxed-out credit card—and resorted to taking the train.

Her parents lived an hour away; it would have put them out to ask for a ride.

They would have asked her how much weight she'd lost since last time they spoke.

She didn't remember the last time they spoke, but she knew no number would be good enough. Not while her ass was so large.

Tuning out cutting laughter, she brushed around the crescent of her forefinger's nail, longing for that tiny cephalopod hug over the hungry churn of her stomach, the embarrassed burn of hot tears, the pinching pain of shoving against a metal bar to lessen the disgusting tingle of unwelcome leg brushing leg.

It's just in my head . What was the point of imagining an impossible act of miniscule affection? It didn't belong, didn't fit in the real world. *Just like me.*

* * *

The nurse called her name.

She trudged to the scale, gallows-bound. The nurse creaked out a *hrm* like a dropped noose.

The johnny she wore didn't close in the back. She couldn't even tie the string around her hips. Its starched pastel blue showed off every goddamn roll. The sleeves bound her shoulders and the chest squashed her breasts. She had T-shirts from high school that fit better.

Do these not come any bigger or do they purposely give me too-small sizes to remind me how fat I am? she thought. *Or is assuming such malice giving them too much credit?*

The doctor sighed impatiently as her patient shimmied half-out of her johnny so the stethoscope would fit.

"You gained three pounds since your last physical," she noted. "You do know how much damage that does to your heart? Your overall health?"

No, I don't, she wanted to snap. *I forgot since I put down the waiting room magazine with five weight loss ads, four weight loss articles, and*

three weight loss medication advertorials listing side effects like death and uncontrolled bowels—because smelling like shit and dying are better than being fat.

She said, "I've *been* trying." She didn't mention her aching joints, the nausea, the exhaustion, the feeling of knives carving her uterus every month. She already knew the prescription. *Just lose some weight.*

"Well, what have you been trying?"

She rattled off the brands of her meal-replacement shakes, how she only ate salads when she did eat lunch, how she had cut out red meat and only ate the whites of hard-boiled eggs. She drank her coffee with skim milk and zero-calorie sweetener.

"Are you getting out? Are you exercising? Are you sure you're not snacking without thinking?"

"I park on the far end of the parking lot, I go to the gym on weekends, and I don't keep any food around to snack on." She imagined her little octopus friend reaching out from under her nail and strangling the doctor.

"See if you can fit in more aerobic exercise, two to three times a week, and check food labels. A lot of so-called health drinks have hidden sugar and fat. And make sure you're getting enough protein…"

All of these things were already written down, reminders taped around her house, folded around the card she used for grocery shopping.

"Let's do a blood test for your sugar. Obesity leads to diabetes, you know."

I had no *idea about that either.* She didn't narrow her eyes or glare or let meanness color her congenial response of "Sure." It was bad enough to be a fat ass; she dare not be a fat *bitch.*

The wait for blood tests took nearly two hours. She was lucky to catch a train and get her car before the shop closed. The blood test's deductible would be on top of losing a whole day of work instead of only half and that was on top of the cost for replacing her tie rods.

The "mocha sundae" meal-replacement shake (nineteen grams of protein and only fifteen grams of sugar) gave less comfort than her imaginary cephalopod friend.

* * *

That night she dreamed of floating, weightless in oceans of darkness where there were no mirrors. The waves' caressing silence gave no

reflection and carried no judgement. She was embraced by…something. Anything.

She was loved.

Many arms and tentacles, tiny and large and real, hugged her and meant it.

When her alarm woke her, her eyes itched with dried tears…

And her arms and chest were covered with reddened circles that looked like sucker marks.

Probably bedsores from so much weight , she reasoned in her doctor's clinically sterile voice.

Still, she found herself caressing each fingernail edge. Disappointment settled in her empty stomach when nothing touched her back.

Leaving the house to get into her newly-fixed car felt like trying to walk out of the ocean. A riptide tried to pull her back to the depths of sleep, where she could contentedly drown in her dreams' siren songs.

Sirens are thin and pretty and don't want a fat octopus-friend. They'd laugh musically at her silly dreams without bothering to curse her with passionate madness.

"Even your daydreams think you're worthless," she muttered to herself.

* * *

The new chairs at work were "ergonomic." Or rather, they were ergonomic for "normal-sized" people.

Her ass hung on either side of the seat—squeezed out like dough between unyielding arms and curvature.

Given land-leg freedom, Hans Christian Anderson's little mermaid had walked on razors. But she had been thin and pretty and could have fit in an ergonomic chair. Fat thighs offered more meat for the razor-sharp return of sensation upon lunchbreak freedom, and she floundered on boneless octopus legs. The mermaid got off easy—even in the end, where she died and turned into seafoam.

She gratefully slouched, legs uncrossed and unsqueezed, in the non-ergonomic lunchroom chair. She ate alone in a far corner, uninterrupted in counting her twenty chews of wilted lettuce that would supposedly save her life.

Once I’ve lost weight, I can look for a new job . Everyone knew fat people didn’t get hired as easily as thin and pretty people. At a new job, the thinner and better version of herself would be social, have friends, and make more money because she could focus on her career instead of dedicating so much fucking time to losing weight.

She stared at her salad. Oil and vinegar spiraled into green-black holes studded with tomato-seed stars, blurring with liquid viscosity. The unintentional alien beauty behind uninspiring salad was mesmerizing, hypnotizing...

Hypnotism is an ineffective weight loss method . Or at least, it had been ineffective for her.

She poked her fork against her plate, dimpling the dressing and transforming the black-hole swirls into many sucker-puckered arms, wrapping around each other. A giant, otherworldly hug.

“Hey!”

She jumped at the voice and tap on her shoulder. *Blink, blink* . The image of her salad-art tentacles, looking solid and real, hovered over her vision as she tried to focus on the human communicating with her.

“You all right?” Mark from sales—that was it.

“Yeah, fine. Sorry.” She blinked again, eyes going to his arms.

Mark worked out every day, or so she’d heard. She’d also heard that he wore a smaller-sized shirt to show off his arms.

Her shirts would hang on him like a tent.

“So, you might want to finish your dessert and get to the quarterly,” he said, offering an awkward smile. “Jennalise is on the warpath.” His tone was not unkind.

“Uh...okay. Thanks.” She looked back at her plate. Leftover lettuce, too-old tomatoes, smears of olive oil and balsamic vinegar. No art, no alien arms or tentacles reaching out to her…

And certainly. Not. Dessert.

* * *

I could be exercising instead of sitting here , she thought. No one would be in the gym; no one would look at her. The team mantra of “everybody’s work matters; everybody’s work affects the bottom line” fell into the same category of bullshit as “one size fits all” and “we guarantee

results*; *results shown not typical" and, if she were being honest, "I could be exercising."

She answered phones based on scripts. Averaging under a specific time.

Digging her elbows into her sides, squeezing thighs so fat she had to sit like a man, she tried to take up less space. She clutched her notebook, estimating her budget for the rest of the month after the car repair, potential blood test bill, and missing a day of work.

If she stuck to iceberg lettuce, if salads were on sale… How much sugar *was* in the off-brand meal-replacement shake? She'd read an article explaining macros and how they affected digestion and how improperly calculated macros could undo dieting efforts.

Her stomach growled. She glanced around; had anyone heard? A hundred-thousand teeth and snapping cephalopod beaks twirled and spun in her belly, hungry for more than salad. She hunched, trying not to grimace, trying not to move in case she touched someone who'd think *that fucking fat chick is taking up too much space.*

"Do you have a question…?"

She hated the way Jennalise said her name. Her stomach's gnawing made her think, *I could just eat her face.* Slouching to squash her stomach so it didn't feel so hungry, so angry, hoping to be less intrusive, she said, "Sorry. Muscle cramp."

Jennalise's glare suggested she should have muscle cramps at a time that wouldn't interrupt an important team meeting.

She wished she could consume herself, like a black hole, contracting small enough to not interrupt an important team meeting. To not interrupt *anything.*

* * *

After a month of counting calories, reducing sugar, and parking as far away from her work as possible, she decided to go shopping. If she'd made progress, she could buy a new piece of clothing. If she'd failed, she deserved the suffering and needed to be reminded of her goals.

A dress size, a dress size! My life savings for a dress size! Not that she had any savings to offer. Anything left from her squire-level pay of collecting manure through phone conversations went toward the minimum payments of her student loans. Dreams of making the world a better place

through communications still needed to be paid for, regardless of being fulfilled or not.

Produce was pricier than pasta; “healthy” labels drew hefty prices even in off brands. Pre-made meals that magically met all macro requirements were not cheap. But if she could just find the right alchemical formula for fat combustion, it would all be worth it.

Just one dress size!

But she found the unicorn: a sweater wrap-dress, one size down, suitable for work. And leggings to match!

For a moment, she felt beautiful.

* * *

She strode into work—a conquering warrior princess *in a dress* ! Adorning her headset crown, she could ignore the protesting whale song of springs from her ergonomic throne of pain.

For a moment, she felt powerful.

Jennalise tapped her on her shoulder, summoning her to her office with a sneer. “We need to chat about company dress code.”

At least Jennalise had non-ergonomic chairs for her to deflate into.

“What do you mean?”

“What you’re wearing is inappropriate.”

She closed her eyes. Pictured her manager. Opened them again. Something swirling, dark, and strong manipulated her mouth with boneless arms or tentacles. “You wore an outfit just like this on Monday.”

Jennalise narrowed her eyes. “The company policy is clear on leggings and tights not being see-through if you’re wearing a skirt that short. That material is stretching enough where I can see your legs. Perhaps you need a larger size.”

Burning bile whirling with chalky protein shake bound her tongue. *A larger size?*

“I’ll let you stay today. If we have this discussion again, you’re going home for the day with no pay. We have clients who tour the facility. They don’t want to see...*that.* ”

She would not cry. She would not cry. *Shewouldnotcry.*

Pressure headache halos spun a wave of dizziness that made her clutch the sides of the chair. Shadow fish in murky water flowed over Jennalise’s

face, drowning her, pulling her into a liquid pit, a hungry stomach of acid and tangling, sucking tentacle arms—

"You can leave now. You don't want your call numbers to fall too low."

Shewouldnotcry!

The imaginary monsters inside carried her to her ergonomic jail on invisible arms and tentacles, swimming on black-hole waves. The office chair squealed space-whale songs of protest, no matter how gently she tried to sit.

"What's her beef this time?" asked Lettie, her cubemate inside the prison-grey fabric walls.

She shrugged. A verbal confession might let loose the oceans raging behind her eyes.

"Don't let her get to you. Numbers are down and she's probably pissed that dress looks better on you."

Kindness was suspect—a way to open the door for a knife to the gut. That was the lesson she'd learned in school, reinforced regularly if she dared go dancing, smile at a stranger—on accident or on request—sit at a coffee shop in a manner someone thought was too-inviting, or even just speak.

Narrowing eyes, she studied her cube-mate's back. Lettie's shapeless beige trousers and men's shirts had few enough Xs to be hung in "women's" and "men's" sections that needed no modifiers or special stores or higher prices. She wore no make-up. She wasn't *pretty* . But she was thin.

Suspect.

There were more fat jokes than ugly jokes for a reason.

The starving beast in her belly gnawed and growled its discontent; her headpiece howled and hissed malicious murmurs. Response scripts summoned her through logic labyrinths leading to neither Minotaur nor epiphany, but rather a numb asphodel solace.

Agonized space-whale screams narrated a chair-bound anti-Odyssey—but not a Metamorphosis.

Fat women weren't heroes or princesses; she didn't belong in fantasy any more than she belonged in real life.

* * *

Properly opaque tights sagged elephant wrinkles at her ankles. Her dress hung past her knees.

The mirror lied—how did one look fatter when one's clothes were too big?

The scale lied—clothes bought two months ago would cling to such a mass.

Jennalise was honest—but *kind* .

"Ill-fitting clothes are unprofessional. I should send you home with the client coming, but three people called out and our numbers are shit. Make sure you tuck your legs under the desk..."

The chair still squealed its truth; the wheels bored grooves into the plastic mat and rug below. Her stomach's serrated songs still spoke in starvation pangs. Tickling dark tentacles—suckers only on the end—told lies about reality that her eyes still saw and her fingers still felt.

She flicked her wrist every few minutes to see her imaginary cephalopod friends flip from her nails. She folded her hands to feel their touch—inquisitive and unrepulsed.

Something is very wrong with me.

"Well yes. You're fat." No one spoke, but that voice was as familiar as...anyone. Everyone. "We just worry about your health, honey. Have you tried..."

Everything. I've fucking tried everything.

Her fingernails dug crescent moons into fleshy palms to quell...tears? Screams? To keep from stealing the fucking M&Ms Lettie always put out between them because she wasn't on a fucking diet and didn't fucking care and probably fucking wanted her cubemate to stay fat so no one noticed how chubby and ugly Lettie was herself?

"Did you get henna somewhere? Or did you draw that just now?"

A piercing ergonomic yelp announced her jump at Lettie's voice.

"Looks cool." Lettie's nod directed attention back to her hands.

Smudged ball-point black ink tentacles coiled and spiraled down each finger. The pen—

Splat-squirt! "Shit!"

"Shit, yeah. Here." Lettie thrust tissues onto her lap, catching blots of ink that bled from a broken nib. "You should probably go wash up."

Tentacle-bedecked fingers dropped tissue and pen into the trash bin. Space-whales squealed release as she stood. Bathroom-bound footfalls

shook cheap cubical walls, trembling push-pin pocked photos and curled motivational posters in her wake.

Her cleaning efforts were as effective as fad diets.

“Jesus Christ. I *told* you the suits were coming today!” Jennalise, perfectly professional-colored lipstick at the ready, stopped at the sink beside her.

I will not cry. I will not cry. Iwillnotcry!

Jennalise sighed and shifted weight to one proper-sized, proper-curved hip hoisted on a non-load-bearing high heel. Her tone was *kind* . “Look, we’re all stressed. I understand that. And I know you’re *trying* . I get that. Perhaps if you just picked clothes that were more flattering for your size, you’d feel better and that would keep you on track with your diet and work and everything.”

Hands on unsympathetic porcelain, eyes on inky fingers smearing, marring pristine whiteness, she clamped her mouth shut lest an ocean pour out, fill the bathroom, drown everything.

“I hear seltzer water gets out stains like that. For now, just dry up and get to your desk so we can get the call numbers under control. I’ll see if we can keep the tour from going down your row.”

Nod. She could manage a nod. She managed a nod.

Professional-colored lipstick perfectly applied, Jennalise left the bathroom.

Cold water from a cold sink didn’t clean her hands. Paper towels didn’t absorb or absolve. Rinsing only smudged stinging ink and mascara into tentacles of darkness around her eyes. Each blink wriggled a wave of “hello” from friends that weren’t real.

I can’t work. Something’s very wrong with me.

Black ink tasted bitter as she poked her throat until she gagged. Burning bile sparsely coated her tongue, blending with chalky vanilla breakfast shake.

She couldn’t even do Bulimia right.

But she choked a convincing cascade of dry heaves when she heard the bathroom door open. Wiping stringy spittle, she staggered from a stall.

Lettie stepped backward. “You look like shit. Go home. I’ll tell Jennalise you were puking.”

Nod. An honest nod.

Inky, stinging tentacles danced in the corners of her vision as she drove to her doctor's office.

"We don't have anything open today. Do you want to go to the emergency room?"

No. She'd take an appointment tomorrow. She'd call in sick. She was the only one who questioned whether she should even be driving with the world swimming in dark oceans.

She hadn't any other choice.

* * *

309.7

309.7

309.7

It was even .2 lighter than the scale at home. Not nearly enough.

"Isn't it odd that I've gone down two dress sizes and I'm the same weight?"

Her doctor didn't look up from the clipboard. "Clothing companies don't have universal sizing. Some women find as much as four sizes difference between brands."

"It's the same fucking dress I bought two months ago that is now too big for me!"

Sharp doctor eyes didn't like swearing. "Clothes stretch. The numbers are right here. I can give you some antibiotics, but it's more likely a virus. There's a flu going around. Drink plenty of water..."

She knew how to deal with a flu. She didn't know how to deal with tentacles—hallucinations. Fever dreams? The nurse had taken her temperature...what had it been?

"...are you eating enough?" The doctor's question made no sense.

"What?"

"Are you eating enough? Sometimes cutting calories too sharply can make you lightheaded and keep you from actually losing weight."

Squirming pressure wound up from her growling black-hole belly and writhed from her throat to her mouth. "Jesus. Fuck. I can't even!"

She let her footfalls shake the scale, tremble the blood pressure cuffs; the privacy curtain *whooshed* in her wake. Octopi could squeeze their entire mass through holes a quarter of their size. She octopus-flowed

between nurses and carts, uncomfortable chairs and perturbed patients until she got to her car.

She collapsed, boneless and blobby, in the seat until the inky, angry swirls in her vision cleared enough to drive to work. Half a day was half more pay than she'd planned, and a fraction less catastrophe come the end of the month.

The tortured whale within her office chair squealed no softer, though the arms dug less deeply into her flesh.

Jennalise was not in. That was good, at least. "Good" as defined by the depressing, maddening, cubicle labyrinth that penned her in. Fat minotaur monstress that she was.

She returned to her car to find a flat tire. Frustrated tears flowed freely. *Fuck. Fuck. Fucking fuck.*

"Hey, what's wrong?" Mark from sales pressed a hand on her back.

She jumped at his touch—*a touch* . How fucked was her makeup? Had she even worn makeup? How shitty, pathetic, disgusting, did she look?

"Looks like you got a flat?"

"Umn-hmn," bubbled through pathetic snot.

"Got a spare in the back?"

"Um... Umn-hmn."

"Pop the trunk?"

Think. Deliberate. Keyfob. Click. *Pop* .

Mark stared at her for she didn't know how long; time stopped being countable.

Why is he staring? Did he just smile? Is he secretly laughing at me? She forced her mouth into a smile back. Women should always smile. *How much of a mess is my trunk? What even is in my trunk?*

Mark tossed his suit coat over the edge of her trunk and rolled up his sleeves. He had muscles that came from working out.

He was already twisting bolts with the tire iron before she thought to stammer, "Th-thank you."

"It's no problem."

"S-sorry. My dad taught me...ages ago...Really, thank you, I'm sorry."

"Really, it's no problem."

"Thank you... and yeah, sorry."

"You apologize a lot."

“Sorry... I-uh, sorry.” *Sorry I’m a dumbass. Sorry I exist. Sorry to affect your existence.*

Perhaps his laugh was meant to be kind... He was helping; she should think him kind.

“It’s kinda cute,” he said. “The apologizing.”

Cute? Someone called her cute! Someone who worked out and rolled up sleeves to change her tire called her cute. Oceans and octopi swam warning circles in her stomach.

Kind is suspect.

Men who worked out did not call women like *her* cute.

Mark spoke; only one word registered: “...donut...”

She flinched.

“Where do you live? You don’t want to drive more than fifty miles on a donut.” He gestured to the changed tire.

Her mind spun like bald wheels on ice. *I don’t remember when I last had a donut. He asked where I live. He called me cute. Kind is suspect.* Her mouth managed, “Sorry, I don’t live far. And thank you.”

After tossing in the tire and iron, he retrieved his coat and slammed the trunk. Then he leaned on the open driver’s door like it was his.

“Do you have a regular tire guy or car guy?”

“Um...” She shook her head.

Could she fit through her open, leaned-on door? Like an escaping octopus? Unable to move, she sucked in her churning gut. Even in uncharted territory, she knew she should take up less space.

“Since you don’t live far, maybe I could come over to your place and put on the new tire?”

Dark tendrils wriggled on the edges of her vision once again. *Something is wrong. Something is wrong with* me… Blinking didn’t clear her eyes. Swallowing didn’t calm the hungry, wary, beasts in her belly.

She didn’t want a suspicious man to know her address. That’s how awful things happened to women. She shook her head. “Sorry…but thank you, really.”

He still leaned on her door. “We could meet for coffee tomorrow. I don’t live far either, and there’s that Starbucks by the highway. I’m pretty much free for the day.”

Free for the day tomorrow? Was it already Friday? Where had her week gone?

Where had her *life* gone?

He *still* leaned on her door. Her answer was the toll, the price of her escape. *Is this a date?* He'd called her cute. He'd been kind. He was blocking her escape.

Kindness is suspect.

She wanted just to leave. "I…sure."

"Great! How about two o'clock? That should give you enough time to get a new tire."

She pressed her hand to her belly harder, pulling it in, holding in the frenzy fighting to escape, to consume the potential threat. "S-sure…" she said. It sounded like "S-sorry," an apology to the tummy monsters.

* * *

She stayed up all night researching tires so she wouldn't look stupid. If he *did* ask to see her again, it would be because he wanted to see her again and not because she'd stupidly bought the wrong tire.

She spent all morning making sure with makeup that he wouldn't know she'd stayed up all night.

He gave her a pumpkin spice latte when she arrived. He hadn't asked what she wanted.

"Th-thank you." Whole milk, so much sugar. How many sit-ups, push-ups, burpees, and miles would she need to fight the consequences of this unwanted gift?

She had a specific order, programmed into her phone and sent as she left for work, so she didn't have to deal with *those looks* when she asked for skim milk, sugar-free, extra espresso to up her metabolism and lower the amount of high-carb milk. She hated *those looks*, those corporate-trained smiles that didn't need words to say, "That's right, fatso. You know better than to suck down even more sugar and fat."

Sipping lightly, she felt another set of *looks* as she sat on the chair that didn't fit her ass, trying to hide her stomach beneath the table lip. "That's right, fatso. That's how you got that gut, drinking all that sugar and fat."

Mark's ass fit in the chair, and there was space between the table and his stomach. His "I did a good thing" smile prompted her to sip again, to stammer again, "Th-thank you. It's good," despite the fact she felt she ought to puke because *so many calories* .

There was a reason bulimia was a “mental illness;” throwing up on purpose didn’t work for everyone. She knew it was wrong, but still wished for an actual eating disorder. Insurance was more likely to help with “mental illness” than being fat.

Nothing was worse than being fat.

With coffee drunk, they moved to the tire changing portion of their “date.” She paid attention, noting how her trunk elegantly hid a donut tire, a jack, and a tire iron just beneath a false floor panel that reminded her of the “stomach slimming panels” in her specially made jeans, skirts, and trousers.

Her car did a better job concealing extra weight than her clothing.

She leaned on her own car door as he closed the trunk.

“Thank you again.” She didn’t stutter. *Good start* . She’d made a plan. “I was going to buy *you* coffee to thank you, but you beat me to it.” She pulled out a gift card and offered it. “So, next time you go, coffee on me.”

He held out his hands and shook his head. “No, no. Don’t worry about it. Though…”

The space of his pause strained the breath she was holding.

“You could join me for lunch, or even dinner, sometime.”

He wants to see me again!

Her stomach rumbled, unsated by sumptuous latte sugar and fat. She adjusted her posture—tuck the butt, suck in the gut… *Do I always put my hand on my stomach when I’m nervous? Does it hide how much it sticks out?*

Mark looked at her, head tilted like a dog. “Sooo…?”

“Uh-um, yeah. S-sure.”

His smile grew—at her answer or returned stammer? “Great. How about next weekend?”

“S-sure!”

How would she get through a week of work? How did one act at work when waiting for a date? *Is this really a date?* Until that moment, she hadn’t known how much she wanted it to be a date.

“So, see you Monday?”

“Yeah, Monday.” She smiled, thankful he left first. Her body had frozen in place—butt tucked, gut sucked lest she shatter the illusion of being someone that somebody wanted to date.

* * *

On Monday, Mark said nothing different, did nothing different. She wondered if he'd forgotten, if he *regretted* ...

Jennalise was still out. *Thank goodness.* Another "talking to" would have reduced her to useless blubber and tears.

On Tuesday, she reminded herself there was probably some stupid workplace rule that prohibited dating.

On Wednesday, she talked herself out of checking the employee handbook regarding dating prohibition. Jennalise was back; the last thing she wanted was for *her* to ask what rule she was looking up.

On Thursday, her trousers gapped at the waist and she had to fold a pleat in the back to buckle her belt. When she came back from lunch, before she could sit, before her chair screamed its torture, Lettie stood, grabbed her arm, and stood close—*intimately* behind her.

She froze.

"Honey, your pants' gap is hanging in the back. Your panties are showing!"

How long? Who saw? Everyone, everyone *must have seen.*

"Come with me." Lettie strategically placed herself, leading her to the ladies' room sanctuary from behind. The bathroom's morgue chill matched how she stood corpse-doll still while Lettie assured, "Probably no one saw. Must've just happened. We can fix this easy…"

She was numb to her cubemate's adjusting, refolding, and tucking.

"If you do this closer to the side, you can hold it for now. I'm sure I have a safety pin at the desk, but this should hold for us to walk back."

"Th-thank you."

"My mom lost a bunch of weight on chemo. I learned to help her watch out for wardrobe malfunctions." The question on the end of Lettie's voice invited confession.

She had nothing to share; she could offer no story in payment for kindness. It occurred to her that she had hardly thought about her imaginary cephalopod friends, though they had not left the corners of her vision, hadn't stopped peeking from under her nails, and hadn't stopped their incessant, hungry stomach chewing. "Th-thank you."

With a hard swallow, she stared at the bowl of M&Ms—inky tentacles danced in the dark crevices created between rounded edges of candy-bright

tablets.

If she did have cancer, would the doctor still say, “Well if you just lost some weight…”?

Or might cancer be the cure… What kind of monster wished for cancer just to lose weight?

“Oh yeah, the pin.” Lettie sat—*her* ergonomic office chair did not whale-scream in protest—and fished in her drawer.

“Th-thank you.”

“If this were a fairy tale, you’d owe me a favor.”

Her eyes opened so wide, her mouth could not work.

“I’m joking; don’t worry. You said ‘thank you’ three times… That’s like magic in fairy tales… three times… Never mind.” Lettie looked at the candy bowl.

Does she see what I see in the shadows, the shadows in that bowl and wherever I look?

“I used to read fairy tales.” There, she’d made a confession.

Lettie looked up.

There had been a time when hopeful light had danced in *her* eyes, as it did in Lettie’s. When she hadn’t given up in finding a friend—a real friend, not one who pretended long enough to laugh at the hope dying in her eyes when she learned they were only pretending. When she learned they only wanted her test answers. When she learned they thought she was an easy lay—desperate because no one *really* wanted sex with a fat chick.

“Why did you stop? Reading fairy tales?” Lettie asked.

“I just did.” She turned back to her work before she saw the light die in Lettie’s eyes.

At least she wasn’t the kind of monster who laughed.

On Friday, as she left work in different trousers but still Lettie’s safety pin, she couldn’t get to the car fast enough. An ocean of tears thrashed behind her eyes, and an army of octopi and squid and even cuttlefish pounded her stomach with their arms and tentacles. Mark had passed her and not even said a word.

But there was an envelope under her windshield wiper. Inside was an address and a time and a smiley face and Mark’s name.

Leaning on the car, she shook free the sea in her head and wiped away released tears. The cephalopods did not share her relief; they were still wary. And so very hungry.

* * *

The sharp taste of blood, the soft tear of flesh—those memories overshadowed and blurred every other moment of the night.

There had been a nice restaurant. He'd ordered food for her. More than a salad...

Blood didn't taste like copper as books described. It was salty and rich like ocean and sand, but warmer in temperature and spice.

She had wanted dessert—she *always* wanted dessert—but she didn't want dessert. He'd said something about how she *must* want dessert. She'd sent back more than half her food *saying* she wasn't hungry. Had he been upset she hadn't eaten his gift?

The muscled flesh of a man's lips tore like raw chicken breast; the blood taste was more like beef.

It would be easier when she was thinner. A man wouldn't say she *ought* to appreciate his gifts. A man wouldn't say she was *lucky* to get his affections. A man wouldn't say she should *let* him kiss her, *let* him lift her dress—a new dress she couldn't afford but felt she needed to look like someone who'd *be* on a date—because how many men even wanted to touch her?

Inside her belly, her imaginary monster friends fought for that tiny scrap of meat.

Had she really bitten?

Bitten *off* his lip?

Had she really chewed?

Had she swallowed?

The taste throbbed on her tongue, the texture against her teeth, as she realized she was in her parking spot outside her apartment and had no recollection of getting in her car, driving away. She flexed her fingers on the gearshift she *must* have manipulated; it felt like alien equipment.

Invading lips, a "hug" that trapped her against her car, invading fingers. She'd craved touch, not violation. Like something wild, she'd bitten to make it stop.

Bitten and chewed and swallowed. Like something monstrous.

Licking her teeth, exploring the lingering flavor, she thought things that sickened her more than the chunk of invading lip that may or may not

be swimming in her stomach or consumed by imaginary beasts that lived there and loved her unconditionally.

Someone thought I was worth...doing that *to.* Who would think such a thing? *Me. I would.* Unlike that night, that "date," she clearly remembered sitting through sexual harassment meetings and thinking *I am too fat to even get sexually harassed.*

She leaned on her steering wheel. *I should've just let him...*

The roiling tentacles in her tummy stabbed angry cramps at such a thought. She found strength to get out of her car and get to her apartment before she puked on her overpriced—but another size smaller!—dress. When she made it to her bathroom, she only dry heaved.

Her body, or her beasts, were not giving up the scant portion she'd consumed.

* * *

Mark was not at work all week.

She wondered if he was all right. She wondered how long it took him to stop bleeding. She wondered if he'd need surgery to replace the lip chunk she'd since shat out and if the sales department had better insurance than the customer servants chained to telephone headsets.

She'd gotten better about pinning her trousers and skirts so they wouldn't fall down—and ignoring her cube mate's growing looks of concern.

She's probably jealous I'm getting thinner and she isn't. Maybe if she didn't keep fucking candy on the desk all the time, she'd get thinner too...

"Get thinner." The scale still lied. Her clothing fit differently, but her weight hadn't changed. Her footsteps still thundered when she walked; her chair still whale-squealed its protest.

Time passed in metered out vegetables, baked chicken breasts, protein shakes (with low carb counts), lots of lemon water, and unsweetened green tea and coffee. Time passed with an ignored student loan, a credit card she couldn't make a minimum payment on, and a blood test with "everything normal" readings that only validated its lack of necessity to her insurance. Rent she managed, along with her specific grocery list, but her car payment was a week late.

She thought she saw Mark back at work, but she avoided looking too closely. The dark tentacles that danced around her vision's edge had

grown. She welcomed them; it was easier than worrying about seeing the eye doctor outside of her annual insurance allowance.

Jennalise called her into her office.

Her stomach full of angry tentacles and arms churned. *What now?* She crossed her legs at the ankles; someday, someday she could almost see, she'd be able to do that confident knee cross thin and powerful women could do.

From the way she sat in her manager's chair, Jennalise was crossing her legs like *that*. "A team member has brought up a sexual harassment complaint against you."

"*What?!* " She nearly stood.

Jennalise's finger pointed, a magical force freezing her to the false-comfort chair.

Does a pointy painted finger taste like intrusive lips?

Jennalise continued, "Human Resources is investigating it now. You'll get a formal letter from them shortly. But between that, your regular flouting of dress code..." Her eyes narrowed and scanned up and down.

I. Will. Not. Squirm. She clenched her teeth but still shifted her crossed ankles.

"...and all your absences lately, it's not looking good for you."

She sucked and snorted breaths through her nose like a bull. "I. Did not—"

Pointing finger. Perfectly manicured. Polish probably tasted bad. The finger was so thin, how much of a bite would it take? Dark tentacles drew her focus to the target; her stomach churned and growled.

If Jennalise heard the hunger or saw movement beneath the pinned waistband of the grey, ankle-length skirt that fell in too many folds, she didn't respond. Instead, she said, "I can't talk about the sexual harassment issue with you until human resources has investigated."

Acid seeking something to digest burned up her throat, threatening to eat her if she didn't feed the dry-chomping teeth in her belly.

With a *kind* smile, Jennalise continued, "I just wanted to give you a heads up. So you're not blindsided by anything on your annual review."

If she opened her mouth, the tentacles and arms following the acid and choking her would burst forth and pull Jennalise toward the unnatural hunger. That would also look bad on her annual review. And how many

burpees would she have to do this weekend to burn off the managerial calories?

Jennalise shuffled papers on her desk, a dismissal.

If she stood, would the beasts burst from her belly like a horror-movie monster? When had she started to think of *them* as real?

“You should get back to the phones. Your times aren’t that great either, you know.”

Biting her tongue, she compared the taste of her own blood to Mark’s. Hers tasted more bitter, but it sated or distracted her—*and them* —so she could stand and leave.

Frightened of herself, of the thoughts floating in her mind and the darkness swimming in her vision, she sacrificed a little extra cash to add steak to her salad in hopes of appeasing...*herself* .

* * *

312.4

How? The fuck?

“You’ve gained some weight since your last visit,” her doctor said. “I thought you were working on losing.”

“I am. Look at me.”

“Perhaps we should try an appointment with our weight center...” She started scribbling the referral.

“I tried that two years ago and insurance won’t cover it. *Look* at me.”

“I am looking, and I’m seeing a big problem—”

“You’re *looking* at the computer screen. Look at *me* . Do I *look* like I weigh three-hundred and twelve fucking pounds?”

Her doctor looked at her with Jennalise’s narrow, judging eyes. At least she didn’t point a finger, but all *she* saw was a contentious fat bitch. “Good clothing can hide your weight, and you can’t see how fat fills in between your organs—”

“I bought these pants and shirt at *Walmart* a year ago. And this is how they fit now!” She held out the safety-pinned fold at the waist. “Something else is wrong if I’m getting smaller and my weight is going up.”

The beasts inside her, the beasts she’d stopped calling imaginary, were filling in space and writhing between her organs. At the moment, they squeezed her lungs, making it painful to breathe. Her heart beat double time, constricted by the hug of cephalopod limbs.

“Your bloodwork is normal. Perhaps today’s gain is water weight. Watch your salt and make sure you drink enough. I’m scheduling a follow-up for another three months, and if you still feel something else is wrong, we can explore other options.”

A fresh appointment sheet ended the conversation. Slid across the table, it didn’t even put a body part within biting distance.

* * *

She received no sexual harassment notice from Human Resources. Not wanting to ask Jennalise, she chose not to think about it. When she saw a silhouette or shadow resembling Mark, she refused to even look.

Ignoring medical copays and yet another month of student loans, she splurged on a dress for the office holiday party. It was the largest size from the normal-sized women’s section at Nordstrom’s. It was gold and beautiful and *it fit*.

Jennalise wore the exact same dress to the party. She didn’t point or poke a finger, but the knives in her eyes were tangible.

She couldn’t tell if it were by chance or on purpose that Jennalise entered the bathroom as she was washing her hands, ready to leave.

With a *kind* smile, Jennalise said, “You know, that color and cut really don’t flatter your body size. Clothes more suited to your shape would make you feel better when you dress up. Black is slenderizing, and it’d match your shoes.”

All she owned for fancy shoes were black Mary Janes with a little heel. She hadn’t had money to buy matching shoes.

Having grown large enough to fill her torso and hug every organ, her beasts—her friends—writhed up her throat and out her mouth. They’d taken her hunger and made it theirs. And they hated when people made her want to cry.

Jennalise’s eyes widened, but she had no chance to scream. It took less time than she imagined to consume the bitch who fed her ego on others’ misery. On *her* misery.

Locking the main bathroom door, she washed Jennalise’s bloodstained dress in cold water. Cold water worked better on blood than ink. She grabbed Jennalise’s matching gold heels. Standing far enough back from the handicapped sink’s mirror, she looked at her entire body and was not disgusted.

Lettie had been right. She looked better in Jennalise's clothes than Jennalise did.

After careful checks, she exited the bathroom, grabbed her coat, left the office. Quickly. She had less invisibility in her smaller size. At least her too-big black coat covered the glimmering gold dress.

"Hey, you fat cunt!" There was a fresh lisp to the familiar voice.

The words sucked her confidence like the last sip of coffee on a Monday. And re-awoke the beasts from semi-sated sleep. She spun; Jennalise's heel betrayed her. Sharp pain twisted her ankle as she fell with a yelp.

Of course Mark laughed. Of course he had friends with him. Their alcoholic amusement dulled the night's sharp frost scent.

Parking lot lights reflected off snow piles and the gleam of scars on Mark's upper lip.

She laughed, kicked off the golden heels, and let ice-cold pavement scrape through the cheap pantyhose that still dug into her groin while sagging at her ankles. She headed toward the furthest parking spot in the lot, swimming in the coat she'd bought to hide her shape, her edges, her curves, her rolls.

"You fucking fat bitch. You think you can laugh at my friend here that you *mutilated* ?"

"A guy tries to kiss someone like you, you better fucking appreciate it!"

Still walking, she raised two middle fingers. Tiny tentacles—babies of her beastly friends?—slipped out and hugged her fingers in response. Inside, her stomach rumbled and writhed.

Inside, she was still hungry.

Pounding steps in shiny men's shoes walked, then jogged, behind her.

Hunger overpowered the asphalt's bites on her feet. Memory, not fear, hurtled her to her car, reached a hand to her pocket, clicked the keyfob to open the trunk.

Hands grabbed, finding only a coat that hid a lack of flesh. Like an escaping octopus, she slipped away unhindered.

Flipping open the panel that hid her spare tire, she grabbed the iron. Guided by cephalopod arms—stronger per inch than human ones—she spun and swung. She spun and swung with more limbs than a human. With unexpected alien muscles, she grabbed and twisted and crushed.

And consumed.

Office mates left the party; none looked toward the far corner of the parking lot.

When hunger no longer gnawed, when the cold pavement bit and chewed harder than her befriended beasts, she stuffed the tire iron and the leftovers into her trunk. Blood stained the dress and her face and skin yet again. Dirty snow provided enough cold water to wash it away.

She collected her too-big, boring black coat and wrapped herself in its waves.

Cephalopods were masters of disguise, and she needed to hide.

While she no longer embodied the greatest sin of being a woman and fat, she was still carnal sin.

She was a woman and unafraid.

The Painted Girl
by Paul R. McNamee

Danny Lozano stomped on the gas pedal. His car raced through the blinking yellow light. He wouldn't have slowed or stopped if the light was red. The Navajo police car on his trail wasn't slowing, either.

"There's a new casino out on the reservation ," John had said.

"You wanna rob a casino? You're crazy. You think it's some Hollywood movie or something?"

"I didn't say anything about robbing the casino. You're making assumptions."

Danny turned the wheel hard to the right, drifted the car onto a side road. In his rearview mirror, he saw plumes of dust. Shit. If he kept leaving a dust trail, he'd never lose the cop.

He glanced at the bundle of red-stained money on the passenger seat. Not much of a take. Certainly not worth the cost.

"I'm not making assumptions. You're not telling me shit the way it should be told. Always gotta take the long, sneaky way to get to the fucking point."

"You're right," John had said. "We don't rob the casino. Way too much security. And it's off the highway. But not so close to make an easy getaway. They made sure of that."

"So. What are you thinking about?"

"There's a new Res store, little brother. Goes along with the new casino. Right off the highway. All those folk buying their tax free cigarettes and booze. Hell, they don't even need to go to the casino if that's all they want. We case the place a few days, see when the armored truck shows up. Then we hit the store someday a half hour before their pickup time."

Knocking over a store certainly would have been easier than a casino. Easier if the old Navajo woman behind the counter hadn't been so goddamned fast with that pistol. Jesus. Remembering the gun, Danny glanced down. His thigh was still bleeding. She hadn't hit an artery, but the pant leg of his jeans was dark with blood. Would he bleed out? He didn't

know the extent of the wound. Grazed? Chunk of flesh blasted off? Bullet still in his thigh or did it pass through? He'd been able to put weight on his leg—enough to gimp out to the car and flee—so he didn't think the bone had been hit.

John, though. Jesus Christ. John got hit. Hit in the face and the back of his head had blown out all over the potato chip rack.

Danny didn't want to kill anybody. He never wanted to kill some old Indian woman. Fuck! She'd shot at them, though. She'd fucking killed his brother. Danny could still hear her cry of pain when the slug from his own pistol had torn into her guts.

John had never had a chance to scream.

Danny had screamed. He'd screamed plenty, and in his anger he'd blasted the rest of his revolver's rounds into the woman. When he had finished, he had stood there, his entire lanky body shaking as if he'd had fever chills.

Without John's help, there was no way he would have been able to bust the little store safe. The old woman had opened the register on their demand. Danny had grabbed the paper cash in the drawer before he noticed the blood all over his hand. He hadn't been aware he'd been clutching his wounded leg until that moment.

He had also seen the red button under the counter. He didn't know if the old woman had managed to trigger the silent alarm, but he assumed it had been activated.

The cop arrived as Danny had pulled onto the reservation's main road. He had briefly thought of circling back to the highway. He decided there might be too many cars—maybe state troopers if he had gone that way. Luckily for Danny, the cop had to take a few moments to check the store before returning to his car to give chase. Those moments were the only reason Danny had a lead at all.

The red, white, and blue flashing lights of the Navajo squad car pierced the dust cloud. Danny pressed the accelerator to the floor. Survival instinct kept him driving on, though he had no plan. He still had his pistol, but if he was going to stop and shootout with the cop, he needed time to reload first. Did he want to add cop killer to the list of charges against him already? Well, if he got away, he didn't care much what he had to do.

The cop, though, must have already been on the radio. The desert landscape left a lot to be desired as a place to escape pursuit. The damn

road was straight as an arrow. How long could he outpace the cop? How long before he slammed into a roadblock, called ahead by his pursuer?

* * *

Margaret Begaye's afternoon had gone to shit. A robbery in progress had led her to the body of Emma Peshlakai, sprawled lifeless behind the counter of her reservation store. She had sprinted back to her car, dark hair flying out in the wind, shouting information on her radio as she went.

Emma, the tough old grandmother, had taken one of the perpetrators with her—a twenty something with a mustache and a grey sweatshirt and ripped jeans. She couldn't say much about the face above the nose—that's where the bullet had entered and torn out the back of his head. Another perp—or other perps—were in a green sedan. She'd seen it on the way in and had almost followed, but she wanted to check on Emma. Well, Emma was dead and the getaway vehicle had a head start.

She turned on the siren and lights.

Margaret reminded herself she hadn't known Emma was dead. It had not been a wasted stop.

The wind was kicking up and drifts of gritty sand were blowing across the road. It only took her moments to spot the plume of disrupted dust marking the sedan's trail.

She couldn't tell how many were in the car. It could have been one. No one was leaning out the passenger window taking potshots at her. Or, maybe they were just smart enough not to try any Hollywood bad guy movie shit.

The car skewed hard right, kicking up a thick dust cloud. The grit and sand caught the light of the setting sun scintillated in an odd yellow haze.

Margaret grabbed her chance to make up lost time. She had time to react, whereas the perp car had pulled a last minute maneuver. She slowed but controlled her drift. The haze was thicker, denser than it had any right to be. It was an oddity but she was so focused on her pursuit and she didn't notice.

Margaret came out of her turn confident she would be right up that car's goddamned tailpipe.

The car was nowhere to be seen.

She slowed down, waited for the wind to dispel the cloud, to show her the car's plume trail again before darkness descended.

The flat open countryside spread away in all directions.

There was no sign of the green sedan.

* * *

Danny groaned. His thigh hurt. His entire body hurt. Why was his mattress so hard?

Because he was on the ground, not in bed.

Car crash! He'd crashed the car! Christ, he had to get up. He had to move! How long had he been out of it? How soon would that cop get to him?

He opened his eyes on the sun setting, dusk approaching. What time had the sun been setting lately? He hadn't been paying it any notice. He glanced at his watch, but he had a hard time putting a timeline on the events since the robbery started.

Robbery. Christ, John was dead. That thought hit him hard and he choked out a sob. Only one. Then he wiped his teary eyes.

He looked around. His long legs were spread out. His thigh was still bloody—maybe bleeding again. But none of his bones poked out at odd angles. He felt uneasy.

Something was wrong. The car was nowhere to be seen. He had no idea where he was in relation to the road. He couldn't have been thrown so far away from the crash. He'd be dead. Had he blacked out? Had he driven the car farther than he could remember? Got out and ran for a while? His head did hurt, a little.

Just be thankful for small miracles, he thought. And get your ass to a hiding place!

He saw a few squat rectangular outlines and recognized them as trailer homes. He glanced around again, paranoia eating at the edge of his thoughts, but no one seemed to have noticed him. There were no lights turned on. Maybe they were all out at tribal bingo. Or maybe some of them were abandoned.

Behind him was a small bump in the contour of the land. Some scrub brush and brown withered grass barely held onto the sandy soil. It was a spot to hide from the flatness of everything else, for a start. He trudged up, forcing down the pain in his thigh.

Over the ridge, nestled below, was a structure he'd only seen in movies and at tourist traps. A teepee. It seemed genuine, too. Its stretched hide

was yellowed, not some made up white sailcloth.

A teepee? Didn't that just take all? Well, it was the only place to hide unless he wanted to try breaking into an empty trailer. How long would that take? Longer than his leg would hold out. He knew that. Better than hiding out behind a rock or a crevasse. With his bum leg, he'd probably fall and break the other one.

A teepee wouldn't be locked.

He put an ear to the side of the structure. He heard nothing.

The entrance flap was untied.

Inside, kindling and firewood were arranged in the center, but unlit. There were no blankets or anything else.

"Good enough," Danny said. "A little rest. Then get the hell moving again."

He positioned himself beside the flap, lying against the edge of the teepee wall. If anyone surprised him, he could hopefully slip out behind the entering person. And if things got ugly—in a moment of panic, he groped at his belt until he felt the reassuring butt of his revolver. Then he remembered most of his ammo was in the car. In a panic, he patted down his pockets. He felt a couple of bulges. He sighed in relief. Only two bullets—better than nothing. He loaded the gun.

* * *

Only his exhaustion and spent adrenaline rush had allowed Danny to sleep. A low thumping beat at the edges of his consciousness until he awoke.

Drums?

There were drums. Close by.

Shit.

He saw the light of flames and the nearly spent twilight at the edges of the teepee flap. Chanting and singing joined the drums. He didn't know the language. The voices droned hypnotically but the rhythms thumped with a strange pattern he could not quite follow. The music sounded wrong.

That was where all the people had gone—some fucking Navajo ceremony. And he was right in the middle of it.

He waited, determined to lay low. But they were right outside. Was the teepee part of it? It was so bare; it didn't appear anyone lived in it. What other purpose would it have?

Giving in to curiosity, Danny carefully parted the edge of the flap—enough to glance out with one eye.

They were marching in a procession, winding back and forth, maybe in some snake dance. He didn't know what dances Navajo actually did. After three undulating passes in front of the teepee, they halted.

Danny felt his breath catch in his throat. Were they about to enter the teepee? His fingers nervously tapped on the butt of his revolver. He glanced around, saw a dark spot on the dirt floor. His blood. How much had he lost? He took off his shirt. He didn't have the strength to rip the cloth. He tied the sleeve around his thigh. He shivered as the cool night air settled on his bare torso.

He covered the stain with loose grit.

Christ, Danny! he thought. *Wasn't the old lady enough? You can't shoot them all!*

John had always warned him the first kill made the rest easier if you weren't careful.

The procession wound into a circle and ignored the teepee.

Three girls stepped into the circle. The participants sang and danced, shuffling feet, shaking rattles, and other percussion implements. The women stepped away, forming their own cadre. At their sides hung multi-colored pouches. They withdrew handfuls of yellow powder and each woman let the powder slip through their fingers, covering the faces and hair of the girls.

Danny thought the powder might be corn pollen, because the women also wielded corn stalks in their hands and waved them over the girls.

The music fell silent. The girls joined the women at the edge of the circle.

But there was a fourth girl left in the center. How had she gotten there? Danny thought there had been only the three. His trauma and the setting sun must have played tricks on him.

If he had to guess, he'd have thought this girl was the oldest. The other might have been twelve or thirteen but this one seemed more sixteen or so. While the other girls had shared smiles and even laughs, this teenager was solemn.

She waited.

A man stepped from the circle, tall but hunched over. He wore a large, ornate mask, covered with dull yellow paint and carved images. From his

viewpoint, Danny could not discern any of the fine details.

The man stepped forward. He held a wooden bowl in one hand. In his other hand, a tied bundle of corn stalk leaves. He dipped the makeshift brush into the bowl, and it came out wet and dripping with a golden ochre, darker and more metallic than the bright pollen on the faces of the other girls.

He painted the girl. The paste went on thick, but the bowl seemed limitless. Her hair was caked before he moved on, dabbing her face until her skin disappeared under the paint. He went so far as to pour the remains of the bowl along her shoulders. It ran down her shirt, front and back. She never flinched. She remained stoic, a golden yellow statue from her midsection upward.

When the masked man withdrew to the circle, the singing rose again, a discordant melody entirely unlike the earlier chants and songs. Dances resumed as well. They were different too. Nothing wild, still a matter of shuffling feet and rhythmic order. The masked man led the procession of dancers. But the tempo was disjointed, the steps oddly askew as if anyone might trip over their own feet at any moment. But no one did.

Fatigue washed over Danny. He was sleepy, cold, and thirsty. Hunger gnawed his stomach. He forced his eyes open, tried to watch more of the ceremony. That’s what is was, wasn’t? He suspected it was a Navajo form of quinceañera. The older girl was coming of age; the younger ones' turns might be the center of next ceremony—next year? Next season?

What did it matter? Cops! *Dammit* , he had to keep his eyes open. He knew there weren’t many Navajo police on the reservation, but surely by now they had setup a manhunt. He was surprised the place wasn’t crawling with police cars and helicopters.

It was so strangely quiet, other than the chanting outside the teepee. There were other instruments beyond percussion, too. Did he hear a pan flute?

The music entranced his consciousness. He fell asleep despite his attempts to resist.

* * *

Danny awoke to the crinkling sounds, rustling sounds. Someone was in the teepee. Shit!

He sat upright, blinked at the fire in the center of the floor. Fire? The hell?

But damn, the fire was warm and felt good. He thought he might sleep just a few more minutes. Then the image of his brother's brains exploding across the store, the old woman writhing as he shot her dead. The chase.

Shit!

He opened his eyes again.

Fire? Yes, a fire.

Whoever set the wood to flame must have seen him. If not in the dark, then once the flames had started. Had they had just left him here?

The firewood crackled, but he still heard the distinct sound of rustling leaves. There were shapes across the teepee, on the other side of the fire. They were sitting cross-legged beside each other, talking in low voices.

"What's going on here?" Danny asked.

The fire seemed to expand its light. He saw the oversized head, streamers of dried corn leaves hanging from the mask like brittle hair. Beside the man, Danny saw the light of the fire play over a golden form.

They remained silent.

"I don't want trouble." Danny got to his feet. His leg screamed in protest. He felt—or maybe imagined—the blood flowing again, the wound too large to stay clotted anytime he moved. He needed to tighten the sleeve around his thigh as soon as he had a chance.

The masked man also stood.

The man drew up to his full height. The mask no longer hunched him over. It tilted from side to side, in a quizzical manner.

"What are you looking at?" Danny demanded.

He didn't wait for an answer.

He pulled his revolver.

"Okay, you don't want to talk with me, that's fine. But I'm leaving. And you're not holding me until the police get here."

The tall man again moved, shuffling to block Danny's exit.

"Grandfather," the girl said.

"I'm telling you one last time, grandfather," Danny gasped out between surges of pain shooting down his leg. "I will blast that mask off your face!"

The man finally spoke. His voice sounded as if it had travelled a million miles.

“I wear no mask.”

A pale yellow light glared in the dark tepee. Danny winced at the sudden brightness. He opened his eyes, expecting to see the fire had flared high, but it was no larger than before. The light came from everywhere and nowhere.

Danny saw swirling stars. He was flying past them. The floor was coming at him. He was drunk, falling to the floor, not the other way around. No, not drunk. Dizzy. How long had he been bleeding out? Was this shock or was he dying?

Darkness descended.

* * *

Early the next morning, Margaret Begaye pulled in beside the trailer where Joe and Sammi Camara lived. Tall Joe gave her a courteous wave and did not smile. His granddaughter, Sammi, though, gave an enthusiastic wave and a big smile.

She hadn’t seen Sammi in a few years. The kid wasn’t a kid anymore. Then she saw the traces of yellow staining the girl’s face. Not a girl anymore, either.

“You are a woman now.”

“I am.”

She smiled at Sammi.

“The ceremony was at dusk, yesterday.”

Sammi and her grandfather kept their lives nearly isolated from the others on the reservation. Somehow they stayed out of gossip. Margaret never knew how they did that. They kept old ways. Very old ways. Some people said they kept dark ways.

“If I had known, I would have come,” Margaret said. “Then again, I was working overtime.”

Pleasantries exchanged, she had to get to the business at hand. “Where is he?”

Tall Joe pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “In the teepee.”

Ceremonial teepees were dotted around the reservation. The Camaras were rumored to have one of the oldest standing—the structure itself long predated their move onto the reservation, if what little gossip existed could be believed.

Margaret drew her gun.

“You won’t need that,” Tall Joe said. “He’s dead.”

“That’s what you say. But in case he’s playing possum...”

Tall Joe gave a nod and a shrug. He was confident. Margaret had learned the importance of caution.

Sammi pulled open the flap of the teepee, pinned it to the ground so the sunlight could enter. Margaret saw the still form beside the charcoal remains of the fire. The teepee smelled of mesquite smoke. In the corner leaned an old wooden mask fringed with dried corn husks.

She saw the dark puddle staining the ground under the man’s wounded thigh. A pulse check confirmed what the Camaras had reported over the phone. He was dead. Pale as a sheet and had probably bled out.

“I can’t figure out how he got all the way here to you folks. I was on his tail almost from the start and then,” Margaret hesitated. The oddity of the incident still gave her pause. How had he given her the slip? “His car crashed, but I couldn’t find him in or anywhere near the wreck. Wound like that should’ve left a trail of blood. I wonder how long it took him to get here?”

“He arrived at dusk,” Tall Joe said.

“What? He’s been here since dusk and you didn’t call us until this morning?”

“The ceremony could not be interrupted,” Tall Joe said. “He was no threat by the time he reached us.”

Margaret looked at the pistol on the floor beside the body. She felt an involuntary shudder when she realized that Tall Joe hadn’t considered the weapon a threat.

Old ways.

“Well, we got him. Or, really, Emma got him.” Margaret sighed. She thought of all those lives Emma Peshlakai had touched and enriched. She had been a grandmother to so many, both by blood and by community. “Feels like he escaped justice, though.”

“Do not be so sure on either account,” Tall Joe said.

“What do you mean?”

“He saw the dance of the Pale Mask.”

“He heard the songs and the pipes,” said Sammi.

“Do you understand?” Tall Joe asked.

Margaret understood enough. She had only a cursory knowledge of their pollen ceremony. It was older than the standard ceremony. She didn’t

want to know any more than she did. Haunted whispers circled those who knew too much.

Despite his criminal, wasted life and what he had done to Emma, Margaret still felt a twinge of sympathy for Danny Lozano.

“That stupid son of a bitch.”

* * *

Danny wasn’t dead.

He took tentative steps and his leg felt fine, despite the blood caked into the cloth of his jeans.

He stared at the hypnotic, gentle waves on the surface of the lake.

He shouldn’t have been anywhere near a lake—that much he knew.

The painted girl stood on the shore beside him, also watching the water’s motion. He looked over his shoulder. There were ruins. Broken columns and shattered marble. Pieces you would see in a big city museum. Not the kind of Native American artifacts you found in New Mexico or any place else in the southwest.

“What is this place?”

“You stand on the shores of Hali.”

That meant nothing to Danny.

Something stirred in his peripheral vision. A floating figure of golden yellow with a tattered robe, face hidden beneath a cowl. Danny turned to view the man head on, but the image shifted to the edges of his field of vision.

“Who’s there?” Danny shouted at the specter, which continued to drift at the edge of awareness.

“Don’t you know the sign?” the golden girl asked.

He turned again, unease growing as the flitting yellow tatters escaped his direct gaze. There were faded characters and pictographs on the broken columns. One in particular drew his attention. He looked away.

“Where are we? Why are we here?”

“The King requires a Queen,” she said.

“That explains you. But why I am here?”

“The King and Queen require a royal court.” The girl took his hand. She held it up before her face. “Is your queen not beautiful?”

Compelled, he reached out with trembling fingers. He wiped away the golden yellow, exposing her ruddy cheek. He rubbed the paste between his

thumb and finger tips. He must have been sweating. The crude ochre ran down into his palm.

He looked at her face. Her paint must have been thinning, too. Her cheek was again golden yellow.

“I wear no mask,” she said. “Nor shall you.”

He didn’t understand until he saw her gaze fixed on his hand. He looked there, too, and saw the yellow tinge spreading—not running—down his wrist.

The twin suns of Carcosa played light and shadows through his being.

Danny screamed.

Reclaimed
by William D Carl

It was only Captain James Roth's second voyage to England, but the fog enshrouding the coastline had thoroughly muddled his navigation. Cursing his bad luck, he handed the telescope to his second-in-command, Michael Pierce. It seemed useless trying to peer through the English haze, for the swirling mist had obscured visibility to less than a few yards. He had no idea where he was or how far the good ship *Emily* was from the lethal rocky shores. The steady clanging of the ship's bell seemed mournful in the gray night.

"Blasted fog," he said, turning to Pierce. "Someone should invent a way to see through this soup."

"Then, you don't know where we are, Captain?" Pierce asked, his deep baritone voice rising.

"No," James replied. "Let's drop anchor here and wait it out. It should thin with the dawn. We'll only be a few hours late for our assignation." He replaced his watch into the breast pocket of his pea-coat.

"Yes, sir!" Pierce responded, ordering the men in his rough manner. The sailors set about their duties, dropping and folding the sails and tossing the heavy anchor overboard with a hearty "Heave-to!"

James listened and he thought he discerned the rolling of breakers, louder than the susurrus murmur of the waves against the ship. His heightened sense of hearing had been educated by years of life on the water. He turned and peered through the fog. Yes, those were definitely the sounds of waves crashing against rock. He called Pierce over to his side.

"Lower a boat for me," he said. "I think we're close to land. I'll have a look around, maybe discover exactly where we are. That way, we can take off as soon as this fog evaporates. We might recoup another hour or so."

"Should I be going with ye', Captain?" the young man asked.

"Oh, I'll be fine, Michael. I'll only be gone about an hour. Just until I have a talk with someone on shore, determine our true position."

"Aye-aye, sir."

After several burly men dropped a standard rowboat into the water, James descended a rope ladder until he sat in the bow with an oar in each hand. He could barely see the faces of the men above him through the thick haze. He thought it to be Pierce offering him a plucky salute, but he could not be certain. He tipped his hat to them and started rowing towards the place where he believed the shoreline was.

After a few minutes, he narrowly missed a sharp rock that broke the surface for about six feet. It was broken at the ends in four places, the very likeness of a skeletal hand reaching for the stars. He would need to be more careful. He had witnessed ships that ran aground in such a thorny coast, their hulls ripped open by boulders.

As he rowed through the stone passages, James observed the tendrils of the fog slinking through the rocks. Immense crabs, larger than any he'd ever seen shook their angry claws as he passed and the roar of the waves on the shore grew louder and louder. Carefully navigating towards the sound, he found himself face to face with the impossible.

A house in its entirety rested on its side, collapsed against the rocks as though exhausted. The front door was open and sea-water flowed through it. Furniture bobbed within the flooded interior. Holding his lantern higher, James was amazed at the relatively undamaged nature of the building. It rested upon the boulder as if gently placed there by some benevolent giant. A single stream of mist snaked from the inside of the house, spreading itself wider upon its emergence onto the ocean.

After a few more moments of rowing, James felt as though someone was watching him. Turning with his lantern, he searched around himself but all he saw was the incessant murkiness of the haze, and all he heard were the waves and the distant clanging of *Emily* 's bell, raising the hair on the back of his neck. Unnerved, he pulled the oars again, only faster this time, eager to put his feet down on solid ground.

On his left, he saw another house splayed on its side on the rocks. This one had collapsed into itself and was covered in green seaweed and brown muck. Drifting past, he thought he saw a figure moving behind the broken glass of a crushed window, but he knew this was sheer folly. No human could live in a wreck like this ruined home.

By the time he reached the rocky beach, he had seen five more wrecked domiciles. Some were water-logged, the wood saturated until it split open like ripe fruit, covered in fungus and abandoned barnacle shells;

others seemed to be unharmed, as if they were built upon the craggy shoreline.

He recalled something old Captain Harry had told him when they were sailing in the South Seas. Harry had said, “We all came from the sea, James, my boy. Those scientists are saying it, and I believe it, but not for any of the reasons they give. I think the sea gave us up to the land, but it grew sorry that it let us go. It’s always tryin’ to reclaim us. Every time a ship full of men goes down or someone is drowned, it’s the sea laying claim to what was once hers. That’s the eternal struggle between land and sea, my young friend. Each of them wants our poor souls, and they’ll each assert their privilege over us one way or t’ other.”

James stepped out of the rowboat and beached it. He was surrounded by large boulders and piles of dirt, and it required a real effort to drag the little boat after himself. When it was secure, he looked up at the side of the cliff. The thick fog concealed the exact height of the climb. With a sigh, he mounted a rough path towards the top, pulling himself hand over hand, grasping at gnarled roots that emerged in abundance from the dirt and rock wall.

When he saw the pinnacle, James watched in horror as a six-foot section of the ground to his right yielded to gravity and plummeted to the beach below. The root he was holding stretched, and he nearly fell, but he struggled with his hand-holds until he was lying on the earth by the edge of the cliff side. He rolled several yards further from the dangerous area.

As he stood, the land where he had just been climbing fell from view, collapsing with a clattering to the rocks beneath it. If he had remained where he had been resting, he would have been dragged down, surrounded by English mud and silt. He shivered, feeling the cold of the wet night beneath a sheen of sweat.

The faster I can determine our location and retreat to the ship, the better , he decided.

On land, the fog seemed weighted down, swirling around James’ thighs as he walked. He stepped carefully through the mist, in case there were sinkholes. The half-moon glowed blue overhead, illuminating the countryside with pallid light.

There were only four buildings with a road in between them, the nearest being a two-story pub with a hanging sign that read ‘The Hungry Wave’. The pub dangled precariously near the cliff, and James thought it

might even lean a bit more towards the sea, drawn in that direction by ancient forces of apathy and entropy. Opening the door, he felt the soft, water-logged oak beneath his fingers, almost moldy. There were no lamps lit within the building, but he could see enough in the dim moonlight to believe that the place had once been warm and inviting. Now, the fireplace was crumbling, and the tables and chairs succumbed to dry-rot. Fat, white worms burrowed through the soaked surface of the bar, and everything smelled of brine and mildew.

James wanted to call out for someone, for the sense of being observed still possessed him. One glance around the place, however, was enough to convince him to move to the next structure along the road.

The one-story house had decayed to such a state that he feared the building would tumble down upon him. He shouted through the broken windows, watched a single shard of glass drop, disturbed by his cries.

Stepping forward, he could see some sort of vermin scurrying on the floor of the house, insects or, possibly something larger. The darkness clouded most of his view, revealing the mere suggestion of motion, the innuendo of many legs crawling over the sea-soaked floor.

Walking towards the third structure, another two-story house, he wondered what had happened to this little village. He had yet to see a person, and he very much doubted anyone would live in such squalor. The entire place had been abandoned to the whims of the sea, to the storms and the dry-rot and the disintegrating cliff sides.

Captain Harry's philosophical musings returned to him again. *"I think the sea gave us up to the land, but it grew sorry that it let us go. It's always tryin' to reclaim us."*

Was this sodden town being reclaimed by the ocean? Several of the houses had already tumbled over the vanishing cliff, impaled upon the rocks below. How long until the last of these structures succumbed to the call of the sea?

And where were the inhabitants? Had they fled the disaster, migrated further inland where it was safe? How far would one have to go to escape the ravenous clutches of the waves?

James caught motion from the corner of his eye, something moved in a stilted and crab-like manner. Turning his head, he saw the front door of the church – the fourth structure – closing behind an elongated shadow. From within the brick building, beneath the slanting spire, something pushed at

the front door until the latch clicked, effectively closing the entrance to the holy place.

So, there *were* people who had remained within the village after all. At least, there was one.

Rushing to the end of the road, James climbed the cracked stone steps of the church. His feet slid, and he had to grab hold of a moldy hand-rail to maintain his balance. Glancing down, he saw the steps were covered with a dark green, moist moss, but he could see a trail where someone else had recently trod a footpath of stained, brackish stone. As he watched, the moss seemed to throb, creeping inwards to restore its undamaged state. Shivering, in the cool, damp breeze, James shoved hard on the church's front door, feeling it protest beneath his strong hands. With some difficulty, he managed to force it open, and he stepped into a flickering gloom.

Somebody had lit dozens of small red candles on the altar near the front of the room, and their oscillating light barely illuminated the transept, casting deceptive shadows around the sanctuary. The wooden pews on either side of the long aisle had disintegrated with dry-rot, and small animals, unseen and barely heard had made their nests there. Large, chitinous beetles climbed over splinters, and a rancid pool of water, the result of an unpatched hole in the roof - had formed to the left of the altar. James could hear something moving in it, dripping and slapping its appendages against the surface of the puddle. As he moved closer towards the candles, he could see someone hovering in the darkness behind the presbytery. The poor soul seemed terrified, turning away from the light, shoving his face into the sacristy.

"Are you all right?" James asked, approaching the quivering figure. "I'm from a ship anchored off the coast. We're lost, and I was hoping you could..."

When the man (he assumed it was a man, as it wore ragged trousers and a patched shirt cut in the masculine fashion) did not answer him, James stepped closer, passing the altar. There were red wax waterfalls off the marble surface, flowing to the floor, ripples of the stuff from years of candles being burned on the same spot. They emitted a soft scent of fat and fish blood.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I mean you no harm."

The man shook his shoulders, shrugging off the consoling hand that James had deposited on the pitiful creature's back. His clothes were soaked, and he gave off a salty, muscular odor. James recognized it from the pub.

The tiny hairs on the back of James' neck and arms rose, and he was struck by the immense wrong-ness of the situation. Where were the other people? Why was this town covered in seaweed and moss and lichen? How long would it take for the rest of the village to crumble into the ocean, and just what was wrong with this lone inhabitant?

"Don't... come closer," the man gasped, and the sound of his voice seemed to vibrate slightly, as though emerging from more than one orifice at the same time.

"Can you help me?" James asked again.

"Don't... look upon... me," the strange voice continued. The man still faced the darkness of the angelic statuary, which dripped green water from a cherub's outstretched wings. Moss hung from the sides of the Christ child's face, creating an odd, organic cloak for the Holy Mother. "I... cannot help you."

Then, the man laughed, and James felt goose pimples break out across his flesh. The man who hid in the corner wheezed, and it sounded as though air were being pumped through a bellows -- through more than one bellows, a multitude of rasps. It was a laugh that signified madness, a dead laugh, cold, soaked to the bone.

"This is... Hawson's Cove," the man spoke into the shadows. "It was... a fishing village... once."

"Where are the people? Are you the only one left?"

James thought the man nodded. "There are... others. We are still... a community. Even... despite... what..."

"Where are they, then?"

"Out there," the man pointed, and James could see that his fingers were webbed, faint traces of blue veins visible through the skin. "They wait... beneath the waves. Sometimes, they try to return... to take back a part of themselves... to remember." He was silent for a long while, then he said, "I was once the vicar of this church. That is, until..."

"Until what?"

"Until they started to... change. Until they were called back by the convocations of the sea." He was silent a moment, then he continued in

his gasping voice. “And then, God said, ‘*Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures’* . And, so it happened. God saw how good it was, and God blessed them, saying *‘Be fruitful and multiply.’* Then, God said, *‘Let the Earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures; cattle, creeping things. ’* But there must be a mistake in the... translations. God brought forth man and the beasts of the land from the waters of the sea. We emerged from the oceans, primitive and wet. We are all now on our way back to the comfort of the sea. Back to where... we began. Back to what we... once were. We have only been tenants on the land, and the rent is long overdue.”

James thought of the houses, dropped gently over the deteriorating cliffs to rest upon the shoreline, half in the water, half out of it. He remembered Captain Harry’s musings.

The man said, “The sea... she is older than any God... and more powerful.”

“That’s blasphemy, vicar,” James whispered.

The man twisted away from the shadows, and he said, “Blasphemy is such a... *dry* term. How can it apply to... our great water, that which begat us in our more... aquiline forms?”

As the man hunched his shoulders and turned around, James could see that he wore tinted spectacles, even darker in the murkiness of the church. James gasped and took an involuntary step backwards as the man – as the creature – reached up a webbed hand and straightened its glasses.

It had once been a man, but its skin was glossy, moistened from the inside, and it retained a sickly, pale green coloring. Small slits opened and closed on the sides of its throat, covered by feathery bits of skin, and James was certain that these were gills, and the cause of the man’s bizarre vocalizations. The creature’s teeth were mere nubs in a gasping, thin-lipped mouth.

And when it removed its spectacles...

“Good Lord,” James cried, crossing himself.

Its eyes had been removed and replaced with purple sea urchins, the blunt tentacles waving in the dampened air. They were living in his eye sockets, as comfortable as though they had been nestled within the aegis of a coral reef. The vicar’s receding hairline only accentuated the profanity of the sight.

“We are part... of the sea,” the vicar said, taking a blind step towards James. “And the sea... is a part of us. Won’t you... join us in our pilgrimage back to the water?”

Two strong, slick arms grasped James’ hands behind his back, like an octopus or a squid encircling its prey. A second creature had crept up on him.

James kicked backwards and heard the high-pitched screech of the monstrosity behind him. The vicar was approaching, moving almost as swiftly as if he could see through the obscenities of the urchins. In the rectory, something scuttled, low to the floor, hidden within the shadows. James thought he saw a red claw scrape along the pulpy, wood.

He kicked again at the creature that held him and this time he was rewarded with a loosening of the whip-like fingers. Shoving his head backwards, he felt the creature’s soft cranium crack like a boiled egg against the back of his skull, and it released him. He fell forward to the floor.

Another one of the things wriggled down the aisle of the church, and he could just make out its bulbous eyes and round mouth as it squirmed towards him.

The monstrosity behind him swung out with its tentacles, and James observed tiny hooks on them, gleaming wetly in the candlelight. He kicked out his legs, knocking the creature to the ground. Struggling to his feet, he ran from the sanctuary, leaping over the writhing, half-human beast in the aisle, his boots scraping over a hard shell covering its back.

Arriving at the church doors he heard a terrible, deep groaning; he looked both ways before escaping the darkness of the church. Fog still swirled across the street, but now he could see things moving through the mist. One of them, a blue-tinted woman with seashells where her eyes should have been, turned her flat face towards him. Long, jointed legs emerged from the shells, scratching down the woman’s face in an agitated manner. Opening her mouth, she let out a banshee shriek, and a long, gray tongue unrolled from between her brine-engorged lips.

James rushed down the street, evading the shadows that encircled him like hungry sharks. He heard them whispering strange sounds in an ancient language he couldn’t understand, something primitive, something chitinous. They wanted him to join them in their descent into some

primitive marine existence, and they were willing to drag him there against his wishes if they had to.

Avoiding a small being, no larger than a child, that reached out towards him with the arms of an anemone, ears like sea-fans, he heard the rumbling noise again, and he watched as the pub tilted, canting onto its side. It dropped into the twirling fog and disappeared from sight.

The cliff was giving way, and it had taken the pub with it. Damning the fog, James tried to locate where the land ended and gave way to empty space, where the ever-changing edge of the cliff was now situated. Moaning, the first house of the village dropped into an abyss of filmy clouds, and James knew that it had keeled over the ledge.

The cliff was getting nearer...

And so was the ocean, with all its wicked promises.

Something grasped James' ankle, but he couldn't see it through the dense haze that hovered over the ground. He kicked out, and glimpsed an extended eye-stalk and red, bumpy skin. Stomping down on the creature, he heard the snap of an exoskeleton breaking open, followed by a high keening as the thing released him.

The ground shook beneath his feet, so James ran towards the area where the last house had been claimed by the sea. After twelve steps, his boots found no purchase and he tumbled down the dirt cliff.

Feebly, he attempted to slow his progress down the slippery slope to the jagged rocks beneath him. One of his hands entangled in a gnarled root, and he jerked to a stop. His spine snapped straight, and his back filled with terrible pain.

Thankfully the sea was only a few yards further. James unwrapped the root from his hand and allowed himself to drop the last few feet. There was sand and rock beneath him, solid and reassuring. He ran to the water, spying his rowboat drifting twenty yards away.

Flinging himself into the ocean, he swam to the little boat, worrying all the while that something that had once been human was going to reach up from the depths with a squid-like tentacle and drag him down to the bottom. It made him swim all the faster, until he heaved his body aboard, clasping an oar in each hand. He frantically rowed towards the *Emily* , his home, his place of safety, his salvation.

A terrible groaning sound made him turn to look upon what remained of the village giving in to the will of the sea. The church's spire sailed

upon the fog, like a ship on the water. Then, it careened into the waves and disappeared from his sight. The ocean beneath his rowboat stirred vaguely, as if mildly disturbed by the annihilation of Hawson’s Cove, a minor ripple in its master plan.

Chilled, James rowed his way to the *Emily* , until he was helped aboard by several concerned shipmates. They wrapped him in warm blankets and forced hot tea down his throat before he gave them the order to raise the anchor and set sail.

“But, in what direction should we set ‘er, captain?” asked Michael Pierce, the first mate.

“Away from this damned place,” he answered. “Anywhere but here.”

And he wondered how many other villages, towns, even cities had been consumed by the sea in her righteous anger over what the land had stolen from her. How many more would be reclaimed in the future?

He could hear his men working on deck above him, their voices carrying through the night, his aides barking orders, and the rigging being assembled. He wondered if there was any more of the hot tea. He felt as though he might never be warm again.

Better Late, Than Never
by Wicker Stone

The windshield wipers swatting back and forth went beyond giving Jack (aka ‘Skinny Bop”) Harris a terrible headache. He despised driving at night. The rain made it worse; especially when the roads were unfamiliar. The cigarette dangled from his mouth and the smoke filling up the confined space only added to his frustration. He should’ve never promised Riley they’d hook up, but as the dating site claimed, he had a chance of getting laid, and so the storm became a nonfactor at decision time.

After traveling nine miles on this unmarked road, Skinny began to suspect the old geezer at the gas station had given him the wrong directions. Probably because he didn’t purchase anything, or it could’ve been his appearance. Ink black Goth attire. Multiple tattoos depicting death along his arms and neck. And let’s not forget Skinny’s hoop nose ring that always found a way of pissing people off. Normally, he reveled in their resentment. His rebelliousness against conformity delivered a sense of empowerment. That feeling was presently overshadowed by the fact he’d probably been made a fool of.

Of course, he wouldn’t be in this predicament if his damn cell phone could get a signal. Out here in no man’s land the device was useless, the reason it rested on the passenger seat.

Even during the day, Skinny suspected this godawful road must be a challenge, with all its dips and turns. Right now, though, enveloped in darkness on top of slanting hard rain, this stretch became a real bitch. Twice already, he had lost sight of the road and drove for several seconds unsure of what lay ahead. Luckily, there hadn’t been any other vehicles on this stretch. No harm, no foul. Any reasonable person might have proceeded more cautiously or pulled over until the rain let up some, but that wasn’t Skinny’s style. He lived life on the edge.

He toyed with returning to the gas station and pummeling the piss out of that decrepit bastard. Payback for this little stunt. There seemed to be no turnarounds or driveways, however. Absent were the patchwork of

house lights twinkling in the distance, as if the only thing this road sustained was darkness.

That all changed when his headlights spotted another vehicle parked halfway in the road approximately five hundred feet in front of him. Standing in his path was a woman waving her arms above her head. Skinny touched the brakes. For a second, the back tires couldn't find purchase and skidded along the wet pavement. Thankfully the car stopped and missed running the woman down. Turning down the stereo, he lowered the window and tossed his spent cigarette out.

Ahead, the headlights lit up an odd sedan, one not typically seen on the roads today. An ugly avocado green, the pristine car looked like something out of the sixties. Almost immediately, he noticed why the vehicle had stopped. The driver's side front tire was down to its rim. In the back of the vehicle sat a wide-eyed boy looking at him through the window. Skinny turned to the woman making her way towards him. Her long dark hair matted to her skull. She was foreign, Korean, he guessed, and she was not dressed for the elements. She wore a pastel pink outfit that stopped just below the knees. White, half-dollar sized buttons lined the front. Her attire matched her vehicle, outdated.

Her rolled the window down further and asked, "Are you all right? Do you need a ride somewhere?"

Seeing him up close, the woman flinched in fear, a reaction Skinny was used to. She didn't respond. Instead, pointed at the ruined tire.

"Is someone on their way to help you?" he asked and felt foolish the moment the words left his mouth. This woman didn't seem the type who owned a cell phone. Even if she did, it wouldn't work out here.

When she spoke, it was in a language he couldn't understand. Skinny asked himself, how in the hell did she wind up out here? Regardless, he couldn't drive off and abandon them. He was a prick, but not an asshole. The flat tire became his problem. Riley would have to wait, and Skinny dreaded what needed to happen next. In the glove compartment, he found a flashlight, and it still worked. He parked his car behind hers, left the lights on and the engine running. He placed the sweatshirt hood over his head and stepped out into the elements. The pelting rain felt more like hail.

"I need the keys for the trunk," he asked, even though he knew she couldn't understand. With his hands, he choreographed an imaginary key slipping into an ignition while turning his hand.

She comprehended and opened her door for him to do whatever. Reaching into the vehicle, Skinny remembered the boy and turned to find the frightened child pressed to the backseat. These were one of those times Skinny wished he didn't look so intimidating. He tried offering a wave and smile, although the boy withdrew further. He saw no point pursuing the matter. Best just to change the tire and move on. He snatched the keys from the ignition and walked towards the back of the vehicle.

The trunk space was immaculate, as if this was a brand-new car fresh off the lot. She had nothing personal inside, which made getting the spare, tire iron and jack a snap. He wished the same could've been said about removing the flat. One of the lug nuts wouldn't budge, as though it were fused to the stud. Tackling the problem underneath this sheet of wet misery only escalated things. Skinny did his best not to swear or show his frustration in front of the woman, who didn't budge from his side despite how miserable she must have been. At least he had something over his head. Eventually, the nut loosened and he was able to mount the spare.

Placing the ruined tire in the trunk, he noticed what caused the puncture. A white marble rock poked from the tread. He pried it free with his switchblade. The item was lightweight. Staring at it longer, the object reminded him of an incisor tooth.

The image repulsed him enough that the so called "tooth" fumbled from his fingers, landing beside the tire. He closed the trunk, ecstatic to be finished and elated to finally get out of this rain and on his way. He handed the woman the keys and she bowed several times, thanking him for being a good Samaritan. She probably would've hugged him if he didn't look so damn scary. That was okay. He nodded back and then turned to leave.

She had already driven off by the time he got back behind the wheel. He lit up another cigarette and then wound up following the red eyes of her taillights in the distance. With his clothes soaked through, he turned on the heater, hoping to dry off some before he met Riley… if he met Riley. He had his doubts. This whole night had been screwed from the get-go. He kneaded his temples in frustration, his headache growing stronger. This road should have ended by now. The old man at the gas station had said only a few miles yet this stretch seemed an endless tunnel of darkness. The windshield wipers combated the torrential rain.

He had driven for some time before Skinny noticed something in the foreground had changed. He stared deeper, trying to solve the puzzle, then

realized the taillights of the car ahead of him had disappeared. That didn't make any sense. Surely, he would've seen her brake lights glow brighter or a turn signal when she used them.

Nonetheless, he slowed his vehicle as a precaution and switched on the high beams. The last thing he needed was an accident. He kept his eyes focused on the dark stretch ahead, any second expecting to come across the vintage model car. But that never happened. It had disappeared. There was no other explanation since he'd seen no turnoffs or driveways.

Maybe he had missed it. He began thinking, if she lived around here, maybe she had a landline phone? If she did, who would he call and what would he say? That he was lost?

This was crazy talk, no one lived on this road. Ludicrous. She couldn't even speak English. But where did the car go? Maybe they were ghosts? That didn't make sense either.

He stomped on the gas pedal in anger. The tiny orange needle inside the instrument panel rose steadily and hovered around sixty-five. With the headlights barely penetrating the darkness, he took the dips and turns like a madman. The pelting rain jack-hammered the car. It sounded like he was driving in a tin can. The wipers slapped back and forth with the beating of his heart.

What the hell are you doing? His mind screamed in fear and frustration. *You're going to get yourself killed!*

All at once, Skinny lost sight of the road, the blackness ahead of him consuming everything. Panicking, he applied the brakes too quickly. The car jack-knifed and slid sideways. He turned the steering wheel, trying to correct the spin. The front tires bounced over something in the road as he braced for an impact that thankfully didn't come.

Unscathed, his Honda finally came to a halt. He turned down the music and rested his head on the steering wheel, when he heard a long hissing noise interrupting the silence. He couldn't believe it. Of all the rotten luck; he knew the sound of a deflating tire.

He slammed his fist against the steering wheel repeatedly, swearing loud enough to rattle the windows. When his fit ended, he sat still, listening to the falling rain. Already cold and wet, he did not want to change another tire, but what could he do, wait for another car to come along? The only vehicle he'd seen on this road was gone. He could be waiting a while. And what about Riley?

Skinny reached for his flashlight and was relieved to find it still worked. He checked his phone, hoping for a miracle, but found a blank screen. Pressing the power button, he waited. Nothing happened. He tried again and was met with the same result. The screen was as black as the world outside. He tossed the phone onto the floor and then punched the top of the steering wheel some more. Grabbing the flashlight again, he pulled the soggy hood over his head and stepped back out into the rain.

His car had skidded off the road a touch, but the ground was flat. Walking around the front, he discovered what he already knew, the flat passenger tire rim rested on top of the saturated earth. He shined the flashlight behind him, wondering what he ran over, but found nothing.

His trunk wasn't as tidy as the woman's had been. He was supposed to do laundry, staring at two bags worth now along with an array of other shit that had no business back there. Skinny was determined not to drag everything out and so he fought with the junk on top and managed to reach the spare tire underneath. He grabbed everything he needed and carried it to the front passenger side. Using the spare as seat, he went to work.

All you need now is for the flashlight to go out . Don't! Don't even think it!

With the cell phone dead, he didn't have a backup light..

Loosening the nuts with no difficultly, he stuck the jack under the car and began cranking. Luckily, this car didn't weigh as much as the other one. He stopped when he felt confident there was enough clearance.

"Easy does it, " he mumbled, grabbing the tire with both hands and tugging. The tire shifted and slid off easily. "Just like that." He was talking to himself more - anything to keep himself calm.

Skinny was reaching back for the spare when his left foot slipped in some mud and he fell forward. Unable to catch himself, he collided against the front fender, dislodging the jack. The right end of the vehicle nosedived, hitting the mud as if it were cake frosting and burying the bottom half of the rotor and jack.

Skinny grabbed the flashlight shined it on the spot, but it was impossible to really see anything. Dropping down, he felt around. The jack was pinned underneath the car frame, wedged in there, buried in the mud. He didn't know how to retrieve it, but he had to try. Placing his shoulder under the wheel well, he tried rising to his feet. The inner fender pinched his skin but he did his best to ignore the pain. The car was heavier than he

expected and for a second Skinny believed his collarbone would snap. Finally, he gave up and collapsed back on top of the spare tire, exhausted.

Next, he tried using the bent part of the tire iron, hoping to pry the jack free, but after several attempts he was met with the same devastating result. By the end, he was stabbing at the mud with the tire iron's pointed tip. Each blow delivered a little harder than the last, until he was simply letting off steam.

He reeled back, frightened, as a wild hiss came from somewhere under the mud. Grabbing the flashlight, he searched the area, waiting for some animal to pop up through the murk. Nothing surfaced. He had a strange feeling in his gut and decided instead to take refuge from the rain, knowing there was nothing more he could do about freeing the jack.

He sat awkwardly behind the wheel with the passenger's side leaning towards the ground. Shivering, he placed the key into the ignition and turned on the heat. The digital clock on the stereo was out. A blank screen stared back at him. He tried pressing buttons to correct it, but nothing worked. He had no idea what happened, just like he had no idea why he had no power to his cell phone. The last time he checked, when he'd left his apartment, the phone had sixty-two percent battery life. No way it could've died so quickly. But it had. He reached for another cigarette, in desperate need of nicotine.

The cigarette made him feel better. More in control. He took another long drag. There was nothing more he could do outside. The jack was pinned under the car. End of story. He needed to relax and wait for another car to find him, like he'd done for the Korean woman.

Sitting here with his head against the seat, something occurred to him. He remembered placing the woman's ruined tire back in the trunk, where his eyes caught the registration tag on the bottom left side of the license plate. He didn't think much of it then, dismissed it even, but now he was convinced the little tag read the year 1963. The woman's trunk, how tidy it appeared…almost as if the car was brand new. Was it?

And her clothes, when was the last time big buttons were in style? His headache was on the verge of busting through his skull, but there was no way to stop the thoughts now that the dam of possibilities had sprung a leak.

There was no way that mother and child could have been waiting since nineteen sixty-three for someone to come along and help them.

Impossible. They would've died of starvation or thirst. *But let's say for argument's sake, they had enough food in the car to last over fifty years, the child in the backseat would've been a lot older. Think about it. So, you can throw that theory out the window.* He took another long drag off the cigarette. The ghostly smoke circled his head and he began talking to himself, desperately trying to find reason.

"Okay, what about the thing you pulled out of her tire? Looked like a tooth. It had to be a rock, but it didn't feel like one" He remembered when he was young and lost a tooth. How he'd examine it, felt so light in his palm. *How did you get your flat tire by the way? I bet if you went outside right now, with the help of Mr. Flashlight, you'd find a similar white object wedged in the tread. Let's take a walk.*

He looked out the window to where the tire still rested on the ground. The rain was coming down heavier than ever. He'd drown out there, so he stayed put. No reason to make a bad situation worse.

If it was a tooth, where did it come from? He considered. *It came from the road…the beast that is the road. Don't you get it? Bullshit! What did you run over in the road when you were skidding out of control? You looked for yourself, didn't you? What did you find? You found nothing. Nothing, except flat ground, but you heard it. You felt the tires go over something. Couldn't that have been a row of teeth?*

He took another drag off the cigarette. It was losing its potency. Was this still just a road? The darkness was impenetrable. No houses, no side streets, no turnarounds. Just the road. He'd left the rational world. When he'd stabbed the ground with the tire iron, it reacted as if it were in pain. It recoiled with resistance and hissed.

Worst case scenario, if nobody comes by tomorrow and the sun comes up, I'll walk back the way I came and get help . If there is a sunrise…. He shuddered. *All you will know is darkness for you are now inside the belly of the beast. Time is not a factor here: clocks don't work, phones don't work.* Skinny was losing hope.

His headache pounded as he tried clinging onto reality. None of this was true. All the doings of an overactive imagination. He thought about stepping back into the rain and checking that tire, but he didn't have it in him. Because deep down, there was the possibility that his worst fears were true. This road was going to swallow him whole.

The rearview mirror brightened. Skinny turned his head and saw a pair of headlights coming towards him in the distance. He jumped out of the car and stood in the roadway, ready to flag down help, a familiar scene. He remembered the relieved expression in that woman's eyes.

He watched as the vehicle approached, marveled at its speed, and how strangely it seemed to hover over the surface of the road.

How long have I been waiting? he wondered.

Starry Night
by Jason Parent

Officer Joel Crombie rubbed his temples and studied the bloody trail leading behind the barn. “What’s the nature of your complaint, Mr. … Haggard? Is somebody hurt?”

“That’s Merle Haggard Forsythe,” Merle corrected, throwing a thumb into his chest. “Named after the greatest country and western singer this side of the whole damn earth.” His few-toothed grin faded. “Anyway, ain’t nobody hurt. The problem’s like this: Lester’s dog went missing last night. When it came back, it wasn’t his dog no more, if’n you catch my meaning.”

“I don’t.” Joel withdrew a small pencil and notepad from his breast pocket and flipped the pad open. He bit his lower lip, trying to distract himself from his throbbing forehead. “You’re saying someone took Lester Houlihan’s dog and replaced it with a different dog?”

“No. Why would anyone do that?” Merle frowned. “I’m saying, same dog but, you know, different dog.”

Joel lowered his head, took a deep breath, and counted to three. When he raised his eyes and saw Merle’s mouth hanging open, a tiny, oval orifice circumscribed by an outgrowth of grizzly graying beard, oddly shaped in the form of a W, he counted to three again. His gaze fell past Merle’s sizeable belly, down his mud-caked jeans, to the thick streak of matted grass, the blood spread over it curdling faster than spoiled milk and smelling doubly as sour.

Joel buried his nose in the crook of his arm. “I thought you said this blood came from Mr. Houlihan’s dog.”

“Some of it.”

“And the rest?”

“Well, I suspect some of it used to belong to Lester.”

Joel studied the older man’s impassive face. He didn’t know whether to reach for his gun or his radio, but the sudden movement to his belt failed to raise so much as a flinch out of Merle. He grabbed his portable and called in. “Evelyn, it’s Joel. We have a possible homicide down at the

Forsythe Farm out on Route 10. Send backup and an ambulance ASAP. Over."

"Homicide?" Merle rubbed his chin. "Homicide, homicide, homicide... you mean like murder? Ain't nobody been murdered here, Officer. Just a little tiff between a dog and her master. Everyone's fine. Dog, too, 'cept I got no idea where that ol' mutt got off to."

Joel raised an eyebrow. "I thought you said this was Lester's blood."

"Some of it."

Joel stared expectantly at Merle, but any further clarification wasn't forthcoming. "And?"

"And some of it's the dog's."

Joel swung his arm over the blood smeared around their feet. The biggest strip was about two feet wide. It ran in a fairly linear track, appearing as if someone had painted a heavy coat with a rake-sized paintbrush. Or a man-sized one. He stamped his foot. "So whose blood is all of this?"

Merle crossed his arms and spat. "Are you daft, son? I done told you like four times now. It's Lester's dog's mostly, and probably some of Lester's too."

Joel tensed then hurriedly followed the still-wet path around to the back of the barn, Merle plodding along behind. There, the trail ended abruptly, no sign indicating why or how, except for what appeared to be gopher holes randomly dotting the landscape within a bowling alley-sized lane. The lane led from the barn to a lush forest. The metallic taste of blood hung in the air, combined with something much worse. Joel's eyes watered as he covered his mouth and nose again, wondering if Merle's dairy farm had recently become a tannery. "Right, so... where are the bodies?"

"I think I saw Lester playing in the trees over there." Merle pointed to the forest at the edge of the property. Tall firs, dark and uninviting, stood like fence pickets in close rows and delving as far south as Joel could see. To the east and north, the land rolled hill over valley, each crest higher than the one before it; those on the horizon were jagged mountains. Merle's farm was but a mote of dust lost in a vast acreage of largely untouched land, dirt roads the only evidence of human trespass outside of Merle's curtilage and that of his only neighbor's, Mr. Lester Houlihan. The closest town, and Joel's base of operations, was nearly thirty miles due

west, raising serious questions as to whether his police department, or *any* police department, had jurisdiction over that isolated frontier.

Still, Merle had called for help. Joel would do what he could. But he had never seen so much blood. Not from any two persons, never mind a man and a dog. He shook his head. “You’re sure he’s alive?”

Merle crossed his arms, staring coolly at Joel.

“All right, all right.” Joel radioed dispatch. “Evelyn, go ahead and cancel that backup. Send animal control instead.” He lowered his arm, but after another look at the blood, raised it again. “Still send the ambulance. Over.”

Merle shook his head. “You ain’t gonna need it. Lester, he ain’t never been healthier. I ain’t seen him run and jump like that in, oh, forty years.”

“And the dog?”

“That old bitch is around here somewhere.”

Joel fixated again on the blood, still unable to accept it belonged to just a dog and a person. He frowned and squinted at Merle. *An elaborate joke?* “Maybe you should just tell me what happened. From the beginning.”

“Well, it’s like I said. Bessie—that’s the dog—she up and disappeared ’bout dusk yesterday. Now that dog, she ain’t left Lester’s side in sixteen years. So, I’m figuring she went out to the woods, found someplace to curl up and die.”

Merle raised his arms in a *whatta-you-gonna-do* sort of way. “Lester, he nearly chewed my head off when I told him just that. Said he went looking for her, heard her howling something awful. Said she fell down some hole.” He waved an arm out. “Them holes are all over these parts. Caves as deep as the devil’s asshole. If she fell down one of them”—he swished his palms over one another—“good as gone. No one and nothing’s gone down below and come back. They say the sound plays tricks on you in caverns like that. Help might sound as if it’s right on top of you but could really be miles away.”

Merle licked his lips. “Anywho, Lester gets it in his head to go on in after her. I called him a damn fool, but he starts walking. So’s I make him a deal: sit down, have a swig of my famous moonshine, then we both go out looking for Bessie. We got drunk instead and passed out. The next day was business as usual, for me anyway ... ’til I sees the dog.”

Joel leaned closer, then checked himself. He gave a curt nod. “Go on.”

“Bessie’s face was all scratched up, like she’d got into it with a badger, and she had this giant black lump on her back, fat and swollen like a deer tick a thousand sizes too big. She was all teeth, snarling and snapping and staring at me like I killed her pup. Now, Bessie weren’t never fond of me, nor I her—I don’t know whose farts are worse, hers or Lester’s—but we kept the peace.”

“So what did you do?”

“I just backed away slowly, went inside the house, picked up the phone, and told Lester he needed to get his sorry ass over here. When I peeked out the window, that dog was standing in the same spot, still snarling and snapping, and it was *still* like that when Lester come over to the yard. Ain’t never been so happy to see him leave, the dog with ’im.”

“Back up. Did you find out what was wrong with the dog?”

“Can’t say I rightly know. But the dog seems okay now.” Merle ran a hand down his face. “But she bit Lester. Damndest thing. Them two were always thicker than thieves.”

“Thick as thieves.” Joel rolled his eyes. “So does Mr. Houlihan require medical attention?”

“Nope, we wrapped that sucker up. But that’s when things got really strange.”

“Where were you when the dog bit Mr. Houlihan?”

“I was here.”

“And where was Mr. Houlihan?”

“He was there.” Merle pointed to a structure dark as a shadow on the next lot. “His place.”

“You didn’t see him get bit?”

“No. Lester, he came running over here like a rabid wombat, bleeding all over my doorknob. So I let him in and fixed him up. Ol’ Lester, he said that dog weren’t right. Said it must’a run afoul of something. Me, I don’t know what a dog might *run afoul* of that’ll give the sonna-bitch tentacles growing out its freakin’ back.”

Joel’s eyes felt as if they might shoot from their sockets. “Tentacles?”

Merle chuckled. “Yeah. Darn thing looked like an octopus, except the dog’s extra legs were trailing ooze.”

Something scurried over the grass behind Joel—something small, probably just a chipmunk or a squirrel, but big enough to make Joel’s breathing hitch.

“Dog doesn’t seem to mind the extra limbs, though,” Merle continued. “Just sorta meanders around, half-hobbling, half... I don’t know... squirming, sniffing the grass, the barn, my truck... and baring its teeth at anyone or anything that moves.”

Merle squinted. “Oh, and licking them tentacles. Just licking and licking, and chewing real quick, like you know how they do sometimes when they have ticks buried in their paws. I swear, when that dog gnawed off one of them sucker-things, well that tentacle gushed like Old Faithful. Blood as black as oil coated that poor mutt’s face, got into her mouth and ears. Poor thing didn’t know what to do. Just ran in circles, yapping and snapping, like she was trying to eat off her own tail.”

Joel grimaced. He didn’t know what to make of Merle’s story. If the call had been a hoax, Merle was totally invested in it.

“But I’ll tell you one thing: that weren’t no oil. Sure, it *looked* like crude—bubbled like it too—but it stank worse than that coon that done crawled up under my porch to die last spring, even after the two weeks it took to find the bugger.”

Despite the whole tentacled dog story being a bit hard to swallow, Joel couldn’t help but glance about nervously. He didn’t necessarily think Merle was lying... not exactly... but a sick or rabid dog was all it was.

Had to be.

His collar felt a little tighter. He shook off a sudden chill. “Uh, maybe we shouldn’t discuss this out in the open.”

“I follow you, Officer.” Merle drew a massive handgun that had been tucked into the back of his pants.

Joel went for his sidearm, shaking hands fumbling with the holster. He’d been too slow to pick up on the crazy, and now he was going to be gunned down by an honest-to-god, aliens-probed-my-dog-and-the-government-controls-our-minds-through-the-water-supply kind of lunatic. His eyes widened, mouth dry as a cracker.

Merle pointed the gun up to the sky. “Just in case. But they don’t seem to want no trouble now. They’re just sorta, you know, frog licking.” He tucked his gun back under his belt.

Joel let out his breath. “Frolicking? And who are *they* ?”

A sharp, shrill whine came from the tree line. Joel pointed his gun. Silence followed.

“That doesn’t sound like frolicking.”

Merle chuckled. “Ol’ Bessie worked up an appetite in them there caves. That’s the fourth animal she’s gotten yet.”

“And that doesn’t alarm you?”

“Everything’s gotta eat.”

“I thought you said you didn’t believe Bessie had fallen into one of those holes you mentioned.”

Merle puckered his lips. “Well... maybe I do and maybe I don’t.”

“Has Bessie attacked other animals before?”

“Nah. She was too old to even be chasing squirrels.”

Joel opened his mouth to speak, but sighed and shut it as an SUV emerged on the horizon. He watched as the animal control vehicle wound its way up the dirt drive, a dust cloud forming in its wake. The SUV stopped about twelve feet from where he and Merle stood, its halogen headlights blinding.

Joel shielded his eyes, but the animal control team killed the engine a moment later. From the passenger side stepped a tall man with stovepipe arms, rail-thin legs, and a cocksure grin. The driver, a tiny mousy woman with spectacles and a meticulously cleaned and tucked uniform, stepped out and walked to the front of the truck, where she met her partner. They stood there for a moment, whispering to one another as an ambulance pulled in beside them.

The two paramedics, also a male and female, got out and headed toward Joel. Animal control followed.

“Where’s the injured party?” the female paramedic asked, all business. Joel had seen her once or twice, had an eye for the athletic blonde, but he had never mustered the courage to ask her name. But he could read, and her nametag read *Briggs* . He’d never seen her baby-faced partner before and saw no nametag.

“Somewhere over there.” Joel pointed at the woods.

Briggs didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow. “Extent of injuries?”

“He was bitten by a dog—”

“On the hand, and I dressed it,” Merle said.

“—at least once,” Joel finished.

The male animal control officer stepped in front of Briggs. “Where’s the dog? Officer...”

“Crombie. Joel Crombie.”

“The name’s Lou.” The big man extended a hand. Joel shook it.

Lou threw a thumb over his shoulder. “That there’s Gina.”

Gina mouthed a *Hi* , then stared back down at the ground, possibly looking for animal tracks.

Joel pointed again at the forest. “The dog’s also over there.”

“So we got an aggressive dog and an injured man, both somewhere over there,” Lou said, puffing out his chest. “Anything else we should know?”

Merle and Joel exchanged a look. After a moment, Joel said no, but his voice went so high, it sounded like a question.

The party broke, the paramedics returning to the ambulance for some first-aid basics, the animal control officers grabbing their leashes—four-foot-long poles with cinch cords at one end. All four power-walked past Joel and straight toward the woods.

“Uh,” Joel said, then raising his voice, “I haven’t cleared the scene yet.”

“We got this,” Lou said without bothering to turn around.

Joel shook his head and hurried to follow but stopped when he realized he was alone. He turned to face Merle. “You coming?”

Merle stood still, arms crossed. “Nah. I do believe I’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

Joel hesitated, then turned and ran after the others, holstering his gun.

When he reached the property line, he nearly plowed into Gina. She, like her partner and the two paramedics, had stopped short at an opening in the forest. Though the night sky was clear and full of stars bright enough to see well on Merle’s open lawn, it was another story under the thick canopy of leaves, branches, and pine needles. Joel clicked on his flashlight and peered into the dense undergrowth.

Through the brush, a three-foot-wide trail had been blazed. Ferns lay pressed flat against the ground, pinned there by a thick layer of ooze. Something about it reminded Joel of marmalade spread over toast.

“Just how sick is this guy?” Briggs asked. She peered into the opening.

Joel grabbed her arm. “Maybe I should go first.” Hearing no objections, he was about to step into the forest when the rookie male paramedic, ignoring protocol and swelling with the machismo Joel had expected from Lou, beat him to the punch.

As the young man stepped onto the flattened flora, he slipped. He landed face down on a Slip ’N Slide of the snot-like substance.

No one helped him up. He crawled, hands and knees, off the newly blazed path. The others watched dumbstruck as he stood, his skin glimmering a fine sheen in the moonlight.

“I think I swallowed some,” he said, tearing off his shirt. He turned it inside out and used it to wipe his face. “God, it reeks!”

Briggs put her hands on her hips. “We’re gonna have to hose you down. You aren’t getting in the van like that.”

Her partner grimaced. His shoulders drooped, all machismo drained out of him.

Briggs allowed Joel to pass her on the side of the trail. “I can’t tell what all this says about his condition, but it’s obvious he can move.”

The trail ran deep and straight. After several minutes of stomping through ferns and roots, they stopped. The trail had come to an abrupt end.

“Well?” Lou grumbled, somewhere behind Joel. “Where is he?”

A scream, loud and close, chilled Joel’s blood. It cut off like someone had cupped a hand over the screamer’s mouth. He turned and saw confusion on the others’ faces—three of them.

Lou was missing.

Rustling came from above. Looking up, Joel instantly wished he hadn’t. Tentacles, slick and scaly like black mambas with rows of yellow suckers on their undersides, coiled around both of Lou’s arms, drawing him up, higher and higher. The tentacles’ owner, whatever it was, remained out of sight, hidden within leaves and darkness.

But the head...

Joel drew his gun.

“Shoot it!” Briggs yelled.

“I-I-I... I can’t!” Joel squinted down the barrel of his service pistol, mind racing as he stared at what looked like a giant, stemless rose, pulsing and enveloping Lou’s entire head. The bulbous thing—*a mouth?* —had grown out of the top of what once could’ve been a man’s head. Not understanding how it could be, Joel nevertheless concluded he had found Lester Houlihan. He shone his light up and shuffled from side to side. “I can’t get a clear shot!”

Lou’s headless body crashed down beside them. For a moment, the others stood stupefied. First to react, the male paramedic ran. The others quickly followed. The trees rustled above Joel and he ducked. Swinging

like a monkey from branch to branch, the Lester-thing passed over Joel and the two women as it closed on the lead runner.

“Look out!” Joel shouted, running no longer *away* from the creature but *toward* it, with little time to question the soundness of that decision. The Lester-thing reached for the male paramedic. Joel fired, again and again.

The thing squealed so loudly Joel had to cover his ears. It fled to the treetops, dripping black oil all over the foliage. Joel keeled over, hands gripping his knees. His side felt as if someone had given it a good poke with a carving fork.

He caught his breath even as Briggs passed him, Gina on her heels, both gaining on Briggs’ partner. The monster had retreated. For the moment, they were safe—

A spiraling whirl of tentacles rolled out of the brush, tackling the lead paramedic like a safety spearing a receiver. He and it went airborne then smacked down, unseen, in tall grass.

Then two of the tentacles, capped with scorpions’ stingers rose above the grass. They struck their unseen target like snakes, whiplashing back and forth, over and over again. Joel could do nothing for the paramedic, whose crippling wails had stopped Briggs and Gina in their tracks. They turned and raced back to Joel, huddling behind him for cover.

The tips of the grass blades were stained like sacrificial daggers. The sounds of agony ended, leaving only snarling and thrashing. Joel held his breath. The creature—this *second* creature—stepped out of the grass.

In the center of the squirming appendages, two bloodshot eyes glared at Joel from behind a snout. A low growl emitted from between curled-up lips.

The dog? It can’t be? But he knew it to be true. He was just beginning to wonder how many other mutated critters were in the forest when Ol’ Bessie charged.

Joel planted his feet, stood his ground, and raised his gun.

The first shot went wide, but the second hit home: dead center in the mass growing out of the dog’s back. The beast didn’t even slow, seemingly unfazed by its wound. Joel fired a third shot, a fourth, a fifth, each hitting its mark.

Still, the creature came. It leapt. Joel fired, but the gun only clicked. He dove to his right, the landing jarring his flashlight from his hand. He

gripped the gun tightly in his other.

The dog fell next to him, panting heavily, a forked tongue lolling from its mouth. A six-inch stinger stabbed the dirt inches from Joel's face. He rolled out of reach.

By the time he stood, the dog wasn't moving. Cautiously, he took a step toward it. Then another. He jolted upright when something seized his arm.

"Don't touch it," Briggs said. "In fact, don't even go near it. We don't know what's going on here, but clearly humans can catch it."

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," Gina chanted as she paced. She clung to her pole leash as if it might protect her against—

Against what? Joel ran a hand through his hair. "Should we burn it?"

"Let the CDC or whoever decide that." Brow furrowed, Briggs studied the treetops. "We should get the hell out of here."

His eyes followed her gaze, but he saw nothing in those trees, the only movement being their gentle sway in the breeze. "Agreed."

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god—"

"Gina!" Joel barked. She froze and stared at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. "You good?"

She gulped and nodded.

Joel popped in a fresh clip, the only one he had with him. "Stay close." He looked from Briggs to Gina. "Let's move."

Bellowing came from the trees. Joel couldn't pinpoint its source. It seemed to come from everywhere and for all he knew, it did. Too painful to bear, he fell to his knees, clasping his hands over his ears, Gina sobbing and doing the same beside him.

Then silence.

"Fuck this," Briggs said. She took off running.

"We have to stay together!" Joel shouted.

"Why?" Briggs called back through heavy breaths. "The way I see it, there's three of us and one of it. If we split up, two of us have a chance!"

Rustling came from over her head, and Briggs slowed, giving Joel and Gina time to catch up. "On second thought, let's stick together." She glanced at the gun in Joel's hand and fell in behind him. "How many bullets you got left?"

Joel shook his head. "Not enough."

"But you hit it," Gina whined. "It's wounded."

“Maybe.” Joel was still considering this when a whoosh of air prickled the hair on the back of his neck. He slowed and looked over his shoulders.

Briggs let out a low grunt as if all the wind had been knocked out her. A long, spear-tipped tentacle protruded from her chest. She started to rise.

Joel dove for her feet, hugging around her ankles. Briggs coughed above him, wet barks laced with blood. He planted his feet, halting the creature’s efforts only briefly before he, too, left the ground.

Reluctantly, Joel let go. But he didn’t give up on Briggs. Swirling his gun in the air above him, searching for a clear shot, he fired twice into the branches, hoping to get lucky.

Gina grabbed his sleeve and tugged. “It’s too late for her. We have to go!”

Gina took Joel by the hand and led him out of the forest. They were only a hundred yards from spilling out into the moonlight when Joel’s legs were knocked out from under him. He didn’t know whether he’d been struck or merely tripped over a log, but he assumed the worst as his body jettisoned into the air, arms Superman-like out in front of him. He crashed with a grunt onto the trail of slime, then pressed his lips together as he began to slide.

Momentum carried him forward. Flailing and sliding faster and faster, he shot across the trail like a puck over ice until he tumbled out of the forest onto Merle’s lawn. Scrambling to his feet, he spat the gunk off his lips, then froze and listened for the sounds of pursuit.

Twigs cracked and brush shook. Joel raised his gun.

Gina barreled out of the woods, still carrying her pole. “It’s coming! It’s coming!”

A wall of branches exploded into splinters behind her. Joel turned to run, then stopped. Gina needed cover.

She raced by him before the Lester-thing emerged from the woods. As it squirmed into the field, it paused to sniff the air. Joel got a better look at it then. Merle hadn’t been too far off with his octopus comparison, except the thing had likely sprouted more tentacles since Merle had seen it—so many of them, coiling like a nest of snakes, or tree roots twisting over and around each other.

And in its center, the outline of a man. *But Merle had been talking about the dog.*

A man suffering from what could only be described as severe leprosy, Ebola, and a boatload of gangrene. Skin hung loose, tinted green-purple like deli roast beef when it started to turn. The tentacles themselves seemed bigger, no longer mambas but anacondas, wiry and boneless save for pointed protrusions. Their suckers secreted the viscous substance that coated the front of Joel's uniform.

Joel swallowed, his phlegm thick with revulsion and pity. The creature's bloodshot eyes locked on his. It lurched forward.

Joel fired four times before the creature closed the distance, each bullet seemingly wasted. The abomination wasn't stopping, wouldn't *be* stopping. The world blurred, went preternaturally silent as he saw his death unfolding. In that final moment, he only hoped Gina had managed to escape.

A roar came from behind him, followed by a trumpeting horn and blinding lights. A half second more before Joel registered their meaning. He gasped and rolled to his left as a slick, pulsating tentacle curled around his waist—before it could clamp tight, it went limp and retreated as the animal control truck plowed through the creature.

The crack of bones snapping almost made Joel hurl. He burped and covered his mouth, barely keeping in his lunch. The truck bounced on its axles as front wheels went over Mutant Lester, again as the back wheels followed. When Gina hit the brakes, the truck fishtailed on the slime, righted, stopping only when its front end curled around a tree, horn blaring unceasingly.

Joel stood, one eye on the creature and the other on the truck. The thing wasn't moving. Neither was Gina.

He holstered his gun, ran to her aid, and found her slumped over the steering wheel. Her head was cut open and bruising as he pulled her from the wreck. Sitting her on the ground, her neck resting in the crook of his elbow, he saw the steady rise and fall of her chest and knew she was only unconscious. He tapped her face. Slowly, she returned to the waking world.

Her eyes looked past him. "Where... where is it?"

Joel turned, then reached for his pistol. The creature was gone.

"It—it—it can't be alive!" Joel's gaze darted in every direction, searching for the beast. "You smashed the hell out of it!"

A formless mass Joel had at first mistaken for a boulder began to swell, larger and larger forty yards away. A single red eye—embedded in a

now-jawless face and swiveling from a craggy neck—stared at him with a contempt Joel had only seen from the worst criminals his department had taken into custody: the sadists, psychopaths and supremacists, those whose very nature was violence and hate.

He lifted Gina to her feet, caught her when she staggered. She was probably concussed and unfit for moving quickly. But if a goddamn two-ton truck couldn't take out that thing, running was the only option left.

He held her by her cheeks, looked deep into her eyes. "We have to go. Can you run?"

Her cloudiness lifted. She sucked in her drool and nodded, then started to lope unsteadily, only to stop, turn, and reach into the open door of the truck. She pulled out the tool of her trade and awaited instructions.

Joel couldn't suppress a pained smile; the absurdity of four-foot Gina thinking her four-foot pole might save her was almost too sad to bear. He grabbed her under the arm and shuffled her forward.

She shook him off. "Go. I'm right behind you."

The strength in her voice reassured him, and even if it hadn't, the swelling mass of tentacles was plenty to spur him onward. "To my cruiser!" he shouted, never looking back.

He sprinted across the lawn, past the barn, and around the front of Merle's house. His car sat right where he had left it. "No-no-no-*no!* " The two tires he could make out were flat. They looked as if they had been slashed, and he slowed to inspect them.

Gina breathed heavily behind him. "Don't stop! Keep running!"

He headed toward the foothills, thinking only that he might somehow gain the advantage if he could just make it to higher ground. A tiny voice at the back of his mind told him he was being stupid, but it was the only plan he had.

Sooner or later, he would again have to make a stand.

As he crested the first hill, a howl whipped through the air like a hurricane. His heart jumped and body locked up midstride, and he fell down the opposite side of the hill. At the bottom, Gina helped him to his feet and the pair raced across the valley to another steep rise. As they began to climb, a grotesquery bounded down the hill behind them.

The Lester-thing was halfway up the hill when Joel made it to the top and realized he had nowhere left to go. After a plateau no more than ten feet wide, the land dropped off sharply into a stadium-sized crater. In its

center was another hole, a tiny pupil in a great eye, plummeting into darkness. Joel wondered what had formed the depression—a meteorite, he guessed—and how long it had been there. It reminded him of a funnel, from which the chances of escape were next to none should that goddamn monster chase them into it.

No. Joel set his jaw and drew his gun. He guessed he had eight bullets left, at most. They would have to do. "Get behind me."

Gina circled, stopping at his back, standing so close her metal pole pressed against him. Knowing she was there, feeling her presence, was somehow comforting. He wouldn't have to die alone.

The sharp point of a tentacle speared the ground of the hilltop. Joel aimed but waited, wanting to hit the thing center mass, for each of his bullets to count. Another tentacle planted into dirt, then another, a monster crawling spiderlike up to its prey. The bulbous head emerged.

Joel fired. He wasn't sure just how many shots he'd gotten off before he was slapped aside like a mosquito under the hand of a giant. When he tried to sit up, his back and hip squealed in protest. He squinted and bit his lip, forcing himself through the pain.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the unbelievable. Gina had the noose end of her pole around the creature's broken, human neck. She dodged strike after strike from the hydra she had ensnared, all while trying to drag it toward the cliff's edge.

The beast was too strong for her, and Joel could see Gina tiring. He ran to her side and grabbed the pole. Adding his strength to Gina's, Joel heaved the creature over the lip. Screeching and snarling, it fell into the crater.

A tentacle whipped around Gina's ankle, jerking her to the ground. Before it could snatch her into the hole, Joel slammed his gun into its holster, dove to the ground, and wrapped his fingers around her wrists. Together, they were dragged over the edge.

The crater was steep but not a straight drop, slanted enough to keep ground under him. Jagged stones scraped Joel's chest as he skidded down and down, vision obscured by a cloud of dust and dirt. His knuckles collided with something hard, and Gina slipped from his grasp, disappearing in a mini sandstorm.

After that, Joel concentrated on slowing down. He figured he was nearing the bottom of the crater—and a second drop off—because the

decline grew slighter. Clawing the earth, he managed to spin himself around and eventually stopped sliding altogether as his hand caught onto a tree root. He coughed through the dirt ensconcing him, blinding him as he stopped short. He called out to Gina but received no answer. Wiping his eyes and blinking furiously, tears helping to wash them clean, he scanned his surroundings.

The creature was gone. Gina hung from the edge of the fourteen-foot-wide hole at the center of the crater. Her grip was slipping.

Between Joel and Gina, her animal control leash lay discarded. Joel raced toward her, scooping up the pole as he ran.

“Grab onto it!” he yelled, baseball-sliding toward her retreating hands. As her fingers tightened around the loop at its end, Gina dropped into the darkness.

The pole jerked out from under Joel, but he clung to its base even as it pulled him closer to the edge. Crawling up its length, he tucked it under his body, pinning it to the ground. “I’ve got you! Hold on!” Though he couldn’t see her, he knew Gina still had the other end because of the force of the pole pushing against his chest.

Too much force. *That thing still has her leg!*

Keeping atop the pole, Joel edged closer to the hole. He drew his gun and peered into the abyss. The glint of Gina’s glasses, like a lone star in empty space, sparkled with hope.

“Help... me...” she groaned.

Joel couldn’t see anything to shoot at. His finger flexed over the trigger, but before he could take a shot, blood sprayed up onto his hands. It came from Gina’s mouth. Her eyes rolled back. She let go of the noose.

“Gina!” Joel shot to his feet, hands clawing at his hair. He dropped back down to his knees, defeated.

There he stayed, catching his breath and trying to make sense of all that had passed that evening. He heard nothing more from Gina. She was dead. And if that monster wasn’t, at least it was down in hell where it belonged.

“Heck of thing, that was.”

Joel’s heart slammed against its cage at the sound of a voice behind him. He yelped and jumped to his feet, spinning around with gun raised to face a man who was delightfully free of tentacles.

Merle chuckled. “Easy there, Officer. You’re too young to be giving yourself a heart attack.”

“Jesus Christ, Merle!” Joel took long, deep breaths. “You scared the living shit out of me.” He lowered his gun.

Merle stepped closer. He had a strange twinkle in his eye. “My family, we’ve been on this land a long time, long before this here hole was here and whatever those things are began their... co-habituation.”

“Cohabitation?” Joel frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, you see, most of my kin, they’re down there now. Ol’ Lester, too. They’re hungry, and like I said, everything’s gotta eat.” He lunged forward. “I’m sorry, Officer.”

Joel’s eyes widened as he realized Merle’s intent. He tried to catch Merle’s arm as he plummeted back into the hole, but he was too late. He dropped several feet, rolled down a short hill, then dropped again, finally landing on cold, wet stone. He ached everywhere, but nothing seemed broken.

Groaning, he staggered to his feet, his eyes trying to adjust to the pitch black, but not even the moonlight shone through at the entrance far above.

“I can’t let my family, my friends, starve,” Merle called down, his voice echoing through a cavernous space, the acoustics so unnatural it was impossible to locate its source. “You understand.”

“Merle?” Joel’s lips quivered, but he snarled in anger. “Merle! You get back here! You—”

Pebbles skittered off to his left. A thump came to his right. Sounds emerged from everywhere around him. A guttural purr, a low growl, bodies dragging through dirt.

Sliding and slithering closer.

Joel fired into the dark, the spark illuminating his immediate surroundings for half an instant. Still, he saw nothing. He fired again.

A scream caught in Joel’s throat. In that flash of light, he swore he’d seen faces, some old, some young, all of them drawing nearer, all of them hideously mutated. His whole body trembled. He wanted to run, but fear kept his feet planted, knees shaking, weakening beneath his weight.

He raised his gun again to fire, hearing those monsters closer now, smelling their putridness, feeling the heat of their breath, the warmth of their flesh.

He pulled the trigger. The gun clicked. And the darkness swallowed him whole.

Sanguisuga
by Kali Moulton

Everyone around me is an asshole.

The air glittered with brilliant chromaticity as the laser light show bounced off pockets of stinking fog, throbbing with the deep thrum of the techno bass line. I looked back at my partying coworkers. They were now encouraging our client, Adrian Barbas, to play some sort of game with his tie wrapped around his head like a frat boy in a drunken, bromantic comedy. *What a bunch of douchebags.*

I sat at the bar to get away from the idiocy. Twirling a coaster between my fingertips, I sipped on a club soda with lime. The mock drink was for appearances sake. I still was able to look like "one of the boys," pissing the night away on expensive liquor, but I remained sober enough to get the deal done. It sure as shit wasn't going to be Wally or his ass-kissing cronies. Of course, Wally would take all the credit. Then his scabby little minions would back him up as usual. I sighed into my bubbly water and resisted the urge to chuck the glass across the dance floor.

Someone vacated the seat next to me and another immediately took the empty space. That's the way it was at *Cazar* ; standing room only with everyone shoved in like bleu cheese olives in a jar — once they were sauced in vodka no one really cared about the smell.

Cazar was one of the hottest new clubs in the city, but fuck if I know how it was different from all the other trendy spots the college crowd was drawn to. Bad dubstep, generic industrial design, some sort of unpronounceable name in a neon blue logo, and they all were overflowing with young sweaty people swaying in a molly-induced dance-phoria.

It ended up being the best place in town to bring potential clients. They catered to "high rollers," or at least people who gave the appearance of it. The bartender knew well enough to keep expensive bottles at the ready for Wally to ply our prey with alcohol, and then switch to the cheap stuff at a moment's notice with my discrete nod.

I hadn't bothered to glance next to me as I drained my soda water. I raised my hand to signal for another when slender fingers rested on my

elbow.

“Have a drink with me,” she cooed softly. I don’t know how I could hear her in the noise, and yet there she was with a soothing, but odd, foreign accent and a reassuring smile. *Was that some variation of Eastern European?* The way she slightly rolled her Rs and broadened round vowels but sharpened angular ones threw me off. I looked into the violet eyes of the mystery woman. She was captivating. Her dewy lips sparkled scarlet and the hammered silver chain around her elegant neck shifted with the rise and fall of her chest.

“Uh-h- Hi,” I stammered, losing myself in an instant. *What is that intoxicating fragrance? Have I seen her here before?*

Women and I were not a thing. I liked women. Perhaps sometimes women liked me. But who the hell has time to find somebody to love nowadays? Still, I could feel a sudden nagging in the back of my brain. Maybe I was too caught up in the drama of work. Maybe I was spending too much time in the office, cleaning up the shit my “team” had left in their wake. I was living without recognition as an invisible, original thinker; doomed to shoulder the burden while others stood under my spotlight.

As I paused to contemplate my place in the universe within this bombshell’s celestial eyes, I felt a sharp clap on the back. The explosion of electronic dance music thrust me back into reality. Sweat-stained Wally snorted behind me.

“Dude! I’m nailing this! This putz is eating out of my hand,” Wally hollered.

“Hope he has all his shots,” I muttered. The woman next to me hid a snicker behind her exquisite fingertips. I smirked back.

“What?” Wally asked loudly. He was lost in his moment and too oblivious to see that I was having a moment of my own. “Hey, hey, hey, hey,” he shouted, repeatedly whacking me in the shoulder. “Buy us another round of scotch. I’m gonna close this mother! Once Barbas signs, we’ll head to the strip joint across town to celebrate. Don’t worry buddy,” Wally said with a drunken wink, “I’ll make sure you get a piece.” He clapped me on the back some more to the point where my skin began to sting and headed back to the rowdy table. “Hey! Slobert is sending us another round! He’s such a great waitress!” I could hear the Bro Brigade whooping it up at

my expense. The lady next to me gave me a quizzical look and I rolled my eyes.

“Are you really called ‘Slobert?’” she asked.

“Robert,” I said, sticking my hand out awkwardly due to our closeness. “They’re just jerks.”

“Stari,” she answered. Her skin felt like warm velvet. The music began to fade away at her touch and I found the tightness in my neck ease up. It wasn’t that she was beautiful, although she was, it was that she exuded a sexy serenity. If bliss were a person, it would be Stari.

“That’s a unique name,” I said. “I don’t think I’ve heard it before. Where are you from?”

“Oh, far, far away,” She smiled at me secretively. “Drink?”

“I don’t really drink,” I said, slightly disappointed in myself. “I’ve got to look after those assholes. I’m pretty sure they’re about to give our client alcohol poisoning.”

Stari looked at me with a pout. “Please? It is custom in my home world to share. You don’t want me to be breaker of traditions, do you?”

Home world … that’s a funny way of putting it. I watched her teasing eyes for a few minutes as I decided on the most polite way to say no. When I glanced back over to the idiots in the corner, Wally the Assbutt was trying to prop a pen in Barbas’s hand while one of the lackeys attempted to hold a contract flat on the wet table. *That’s not going to go well.* With a sigh, I turned back to Stari and rubbed my face with my hands a couple of times.

“Fuck it. Why not? Yeah, I’ll join you for a drink.”

Stari clapped excitedly and waved to the bartender, who raised his eyebrows at me. I nodded. He shrugged and quickly produced two nearly identical shooters from under the bar. Her drink was a soft pink color. The effervescent fizz trailed delightfully up the side of the glass in thin streams and pooled around a bright red stemless cherry that floated up towards the top. Mine was not as neat. The color was more red than pink, darkening the cherry in the glass to an old blood color. The bubbles were larger. They hung around longer and the mangled cherry wasn’t floating.

I supposed it probably tasted fine; not that I knew what it was supposed to taste like. I was telling the truth when I told Stari that I didn’t drink often. I picked up the tiny glass and prepared to give it a sip when

Stari stopped me by covering the top of my drink with her palm. She looked me in the eyes and I fell into the calming abyss of her large pupils.

“In my home world, we share the *sanguisuga* with a newcomer,” she said. Her slow words gave me pause. “It is a celebration for us. A rebirth. The cherry represents all hopes and dreamings and our deepest desires. To chew the cherry would be to squish our wishes. We drink the *sanguisuga* in one gulp. If we succeed, we are blessed with a new, healthy life. If one of us fails,” she warned, “we are both doomed to unhappiness and poor luck.”

I glanced back down at the shooter as she took her hand away, second guessing my choice. I couldn’t be sure, but in the strobe, it looked like the cherry in my glass wriggled a bit. I felt a lump in my throat form out of repulsion, but I pushed the feeling away. After all, *cherries don’t wriggle.*

“No pressure then,” I said, feeling a sudden chill. I held up the shot to toast and she held hers up in return.

“May all your dreams come true,” she said before quickly throwing her heart-shaped face back with the glass at her lips. She emptied the alcohol into her mouth and swallowed, cherry and all, before looking back at me. A few droplets of liquid lingered on her lips and she licked them away with a wink. “Now you.”

I don’t think I had ever met anyone who was *actually* superstitious. I met plenty of people who thought “13 is an unlucky number” or would carry good luck charms in their pockets, but their unease was convenient. Superstition was a scapegoat to explain away unexpected outcomes and failures. Stari’s firm superstition hung awkwardly in the air despite her best attempts to hide it. Her long red fingernails *tap-tap-tapped* on the smooth surface of her empty glass as she waited. If I screwed this up, there probably wouldn’t be any forgiveness.

I took a deep breath and pounded the shot, expecting a burning sensation and to twist my face into all sorts of contortions as I had done in the past with whiskey or tequila. The burning never came. It was sweet, not much in the way of flavor. Maybe slightly coppery? The mushed up cherry was easy to swallow. It was the bubbles that seemed to catch in my throat, grabbing on their way down.

“Easy-peasy,” I proclaimed. A wide grin spread across Stari’s face and she clapped her hands before calling to the bartender, her whole demeanor spinning on a dime. “Let’s have something fun this time! What do you like?” Stari asked.

“I’m not sure. Something sweet, maybe?” I suggested.

Stari delightfully asked for two zombies. When they were brought to us, they looked decently familiar, like something I had seen on a picture menu at a highly decorated Chinese restaurant. The tiny green umbrella tickled my nose as I took a sip. It tasted like a sweet, fruit cocktail fantasy.

We spent the evening talking and laughing. She shared more about her family, like how her glutton of a brother was the exact opposite of her. “We were born at the same time, yes? But he is greedy and wants everything right now. I’m different. I like to savor life. I like to take my time. Do you like to take *your* time, Robert?”

“I could take all night if you wanted, Stari,” I said. The smooth words were out of my mouth before I could stop myself and I felt my face flush red. *Who the hell am I right now?* Despite my boldness Stari giggled and leaned in closer.

“What about you? Do you have family?”

“No,” I said, bringing myself back into focus. “No siblings for me. My parents are long gone. It’s just me.”

“That’s a shame,” she said. “At least we have new friends. To new friends!”

“New friends!” I cheered. We clinked our glasses together.

As the drinks kept coming, I found myself opening up in unfamiliar ways. I became comfortable talking about my life, how much I hated my job, my goals, and my flaws and, to be honest, it felt good to finally let everything out. At one point, I remembered to look back towards my coworkers and it seemed they had left for the strip club without me. I didn’t care. I was living in the moment, taking a chance with a pretty woman. *Maybe this is the new me. Maybe this is what I needed.*

Bobbing along to the techno, Stari’s constant movement felt infectious. She eventually stood up and took my hand, pulling me towards the dance floor with a wide grin. I chuckled. “I don’t dance.” She ignored my protests and pulled harder, easily sliding me off my stool, and I folded. Who was I to deny the lady of a goofy, flailing fandango?

Like an undulating belly dancer, Stari took to the center of the floor with captivating finesse. I jerked around oafishly. Something about the heat and the energy in the room bewitched me into beaming in true fruitcake fashion. She took my hands and I felt myself spinning. Was it the

drink? Was it the dance floor? I couldn't be sure. The world swirled around and around and I abandoned all of my misery.

"I love you!" I laughed. Stari laughed back, her delicate voice tinkling softly with the music. Then it became louder. And louder. And deeper. The spinning got faster. Reality felt slower. Was the fog getting thicker? I felt choked up and my eyes began to sting. Stari's chortling morphed into sinister cackling in slow-mo. Her eyed flashed with an evil possession and my stomach began to heave. I tried to stop. With a painful crack and a smack, my hands and knees hit the floor.

"Oh, poor baby …" I heard Stari say, only her voice sounded far away. It echoed demonically in my ears as I plunged into silence … then darkness.

* * *

I winced as I opened my eyes in a bright room, my head spinning. I smacked my lips only to taste rancid, bloody bile. Once I was able to open my eyes more fully, I froze.

This was *not* my shabby studio. Everything was modern and sleek. The gray sheets felt creamy against my itchy skin. The bedroom was adorned with black lacquered furniture and silver freeform sculptures. Sunlight streamed in through sheer curtains and warmed my bare feet.

Spying the bathroom in the corner, I rolled out of bed with a groan onto walnut floors. Slowly, on all fours, I crawled into the sanctuary of the porcelain God and hoisted myself up to the toilet, just in time to puke a whole lot of red. It was concerning for a moment, until I remembered all of the tiki drinks I had poured down my throat the night before. And that mysterious *sanguisuga.* The drink that started it all.

I pulled myself up to stand in front of the sink. The chrome taps felt cool, not unlike the cold water that I filled my hands with to splash over my stubbled cheeks. Rubbing my eyes, I looked into the mirror and hardly recognized myself.

What. The. Fuck. Somehow, overnight, my baby fat frame had taken on a rippled definition. I was no Schwarzenegger, but I saw chiseled muscles that I never knew I had. Lifting my shirt, I found a six-pack. *A six-pack* . Not of beer, but on my body, which was now the body I had always dreamed of and yet was too lazy to commit to. My jaw seemed stronger. My hands looked forceful. My hair fell in a stylishly rugged sort of way.

My gaze, although startled and confused, was the gaze of a successful and confident man. I saw the man that I had wanted to become staring back at me.

I made my way back into the bedroom in a daze. I saw Stari sleeping. I realized that I must be back at her place. She probably didn't think to look in my wallet to find my address. *Or maybe she had been worried about me, figuring she could keep a better eye on me if she took me home.* Looking down at my bare knees, I realized that Stari probably undressed me too. I quietly began to look for my pants.

And jacket.

And tie. I had been wearing a tie.

Despite my best efforts, my rustling woke Stari anyway. She gave me a sleepy smile and yawned. "Good morning," she said while propping herself up on her elbows. The sheet slipped down her torso and revealed naked shoulders. "Come back to bed, darling. You don't have to be to work so early, do you?"

I stared at her, slightly mortified. "I-um, did we?" *Did I remember to wear a condom?* I shook my head to clear it quickly, like an Etch-a-Sketch, but for unfocused thoughts. "I'm sorry," I whispered, "I'm just looking for my clothes."

Stari rolled over, closed her eyes, and snuggled her pillow. "They're in the closet. Stop being silly."

I opened the door to an enormous walk-in closet, searching the floor for my dirty socks. No luck. *Maybe the laundry basket?* I rummaged around and saw nothing familiar, so I searched the hangers. I thumbed through thousands of dollars of men's clothing; all in my size. On the other side was a wardrobe of women's shoes and clothes, equally impressive and worth just as much, probably more.

Well, I can't leave here naked …

There was nothing cheap for me to wear; no department store shirts or thrift shop slacks. I decided to borrow a slate blue Burberry suit, a diamond patterned tie, merino wool dress socks, and Armani oxfords. *Stari's husband or whoever is going to kill me if I ruin any of this.* Having never been able to afford a smidgen of the luxury that was now upon my body, I stared at my reflection in the closet mirror. It fit in the way that only a high-end tailor could achieve. My shaking hands slid over the silk tie. It was at that moment when I noticed a tiny detail; something that I

had overlooked since my waking. A simple golden band encircled my left ring finger.

Whoa. Did I get married last night? Am I Stari's "whoever?" My mind raced with possibilities and I began tearing the closet apart for any indication of whose home I was actually in. *What the hell kind of person goes around to clubs and — what was in that drink? Was I drugged?*

My eyes darted wildly around at the vast wardrobe. I felt my heart begin to palpitate. Sweat beaded up at my brow. Everything fit. All of it was stuff I would buy myself if I could afford it. *How the fuck did she know? Has she been stalking me? Am I the victim of a … Christ, I don't even know what the fuck kind of crime this would be. Midnight matrimony?*

I tiptoed out of the bedroom, careful not to disturb the psycho woman I had shared a bed with. If I could just escape and get to the office, maybe I could sort out whatever the fuck this was.

I raced around in search of the door but this place was huge. The rest of the apartment was just as lush as the bedroom. It was decorated in deep tones with bright walls and silver highlights. As I passed down one hallway to another rich room, I paused in front of a framed photograph on the wall. It stood out with its goofy tourist frame. A pink bikini popped against Caribbean blues. There was a man wearing a snorkel on his head. Stari looked happy in the photo, as did someone else who looked exactly like me.

I walked down a line of photographs, scrutinizing every one. Honeymoon, holidays to exotic worldly locations, meetings with celebrities; it was as if I had fallen through the looking glass into an alternate dimension. This was the life I gave myself when I closed my eyes at night.

The room began to spin again and I had to sit down. I found a nearby chair in the breakfast nook and rested my head against the cool marble table. *Mistaken identity. That's what this is. I have a secret twin and Stari thinks I'm him. She brought home the wrong dude.*

I didn't stir until Stari touched the back of my head lightly.

"Robby? Are you feeling okay, my love?" she asked.

I shuddered. *My twin has my name. My goddamned twin has my name and goes by the nickname that I hate the most.*

"I don't think I am who you think I am," I mumbled. I looked up to watch a concerned frown slowly spread across Stari's face.

“And who do you think you are?”

“The mysterious twin of your husband that you picked up at the bar last night by mistake?”

Stari sighed. “Is this about that Barbas deal?”

Had I told her my clients name? I don’t remember.

She ran her fingers lightly across my forehead. “You have nothing to worry about, Robby. Adrian signed papers, you sent them back to the office with Wally, and then we spent the evening celebrating.” Her accented English suddenly struck me as adorable, somehow subduing the panic that I was feeling about whatever *Twilight Zone* episode I had found myself in.

“We did?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “And I know exactly who you are. You are Robert Jon Alexander, the man I feel in love with.”

“*Fell* in love with,” I said. *This isn’t real. She can’t be real.*

“ Fell in love with,” Stari smiled. “Did I help? Are you better?”

“Just a little lightheaded. And confused,” I mumbled.

Stari bent down to kiss me quickly on the cheek. The way she smiled brought calm to my aching brain. Then, a sudden snap. Her head jerked wildly around and her grin became impossibly wide. I watched her eyes roll back, flash like a thunderstorm, and then melt into gaping, bloody holes as the skin flayed from her face. Wet muscles and tendons gleamed in the morning sunlight as her stark white teeth grew longer and sharper with each excruciating second.

I jumped out of my seat and fell backward into the wall. The moment passed as quickly as it had come.

“What’s wrong, Robby? Do I have dragon breath?” She exhaled into her palm and sniffed loudly while wrinkling her nose.

* * *

My head was throbbing as I walked into the office. Echoes of ‘*morning Mr. Alexander* followed me from department to department and I nodded them off. I headed toward my desk, expecting Wally and the Bro Brigade to be crouched over a computer looking at stupid internet shit or nursing hangovers. Imagine my surprise when I spotted them working diligently, and dressed like actual professionals.

“Good morning, Mr. Alexander!” said Wally, jumping to his feet with a steaming mug in his hand. “I hope you slept well. I have your Americano here, just the way you like it. May I carry it to your office for you?”

Who the fuck is this? I resisted the urge to do a double take. Fearing what gibberish might come out of my mouth, I simply nodded as Wally led the way down past cube land.

“Mr. Davis was asking for you earlier. I told him all about how you really nailed that Barbas account. I’m sure he’ll want to talk with you about it later. Are you feeling okay? You look a little pale.”

I swallowed hard and fought for the right words as Wally led me into a large, dim room. “I'm fine, Wally. Just a bit of a migraine. I’m sure I’ll live,” I said, stopping short to take the whole picture in. Wally put the mug of coffee on a mahogany desk and opened the blinds.

I’ve heard the term “jaw-dropping” before, but I hadn’t experienced it until that moment. The city waved hello to me from my corner office, far above the miniature taxis and bustling people on the streets.

“Migraines again?” Wally pulled open a drawer and brought out a bottle of painkillers. He shook two into his hand and held them out to me. “Why don’t I move your meetings around? I could call your acupuncturist.”

I stared out the window, awash in amazement. “You don’t have to do that, Wally,” I said, picking up the mug. I took the pills from his hand and gulped them down. It was the most smooth, robust coffee I had ever tasted. I just about moaned. *Oh, baby, where have you been all my life?*

Wally excused himself as I sat down hard in the chair behind my desk, rubbing my temples. It was maybe thirty seconds before a short *buzz* and Wally’s voice chimed in over the intercom. “Sorry to bother you, Sir, but you have a call.”

I fumbled with the phone receiver before getting it to my ear. All I heard was static. “Hello?” I muttered.

It was the screaming that hit me the hardest. A shrill screech that pierced deeply into my brain. All I could feel was a sharp, white heat. “*You’re being eaten alive! You’re being eaten alive, Robert!”*

I dropped the phone and it clattered to the top of the desk. The screaming didn’t stop. With quick but trembling hands I returned the receiver to the cradle, my mind sputtering and my stomach beginning to heave. Puke number two made it into the small wire wastebasket next to

me. The putrid acid from my stomach seeped out through the mesh and began to soak into the carpet.

Wally found me on my back in the center of the room maybe twenty minutes later as he popped in to remind me about my meeting with Tom Davis. He helped pull me to my feet and immediately began soaking up my vomit with some tissues he had in his pocket.

“Don’t worry about this, Mr. Alexander. I’ll take care of it.” I stared in awe at the twist of events before me. If I hadn’t felt so shitty, I might have been able to enjoy the sight of Wally mopping up my barf.

I composed myself before marching off to Tom’s office. *I’ll just get through the day. I can figure out the rest later.* Knocking lightly on the door, I heard Tom’s familiar bellow telling me to come in.

“Robby! I heard you had a successful night,” said Tom, standing to button his suit jacket. He came around his desk and clasped my hand in a firm shake.

“It appears so,” I said.

“Always humble,” Tom said with a wink. “Drink?”

My stomach protested. Loudly. Tom must have seen me turn green at the thought and course corrected. “Oh, that’s right. You aren’t much of a drinker. I hear you tied one on last night, though. You feelin’ it?” he asked with a knowing chuckle. “Never mind. Let’s give the troops their pep talk and send them after the next big fish. Shall we?” He began walking towards the door and I followed.

We strolled down the halls, greeting people along the way until we made it to cube land where everyone sat with drone-like efficiency, *tap-tap-tapping* away on their keyboards. “Everyone!” said Tom, “Mr. Alexander and I would like to take a moment to congratulate you on a job well done.”

As if on cue, the office workers looked up and listened politely. Wally and the boys stood from their chairs and beamed. They high-fived each other in a distinctly stiff sort of way, not at all like the relaxed slackers I knew them to be.

“Robby may have brought the whale to port,” Tom continued, “but it’s all of your hard work that reeled him in. Your hard work, and Wally’s constant ass-kissing, am I right?” The whole office chuckled right along with Tom. Well, the whole office except Wally, whose proud grin had

turned into a sour scowl. His hands clenched down at his sides. I was too busy reminding myself to laugh along and blend in to care.

“To celebrate, I thought I’d surprise you all with a special treat. Bring her in, boys!” With a broad wave of his hands, a few of the mail room clerks wheeled in a squeaking cart, atop which stood a five-tiered monster of a cake. “Robby, would you do the honors?”

I gingerly nodded, taking the long cake knife in my hand. I sliced into one of the middle tiers and pulled out a small piece of red velvet cake, placing it on a paper plate that one of the mail clerks held out to me.

“Let me take over for you, sir,” said Wally through clenched teeth, coming to my aid as I awkwardly stood with a knife in one hand and a paper plate in the other. Wally expertly took the knife and began cutting off large slices as Tom cut to the front of the line.

Wally flashed the fakest smile I had ever seen as he handed the boss a plate. Slowly, I saw his fingers wrap tightly around the knife handle. With one swift motion, Wally stepped forward and stabbed Tom in the chest. Tom began to scream. Or maybe it was me. Blood poured from the wound as Wally pulled back on the blade and thrust it into Tom again, then again, and again.

I looked around wildly, but the worker bees in cube land kept their heads down, forking free cake into their mouths. Every once in a while, someone would glance over and shake their heads in disappointment as if to say, “Oh, what a shame. Still, it was bound to happen.”

Tom fell to the floor, his blood pooling around him. Wally began cutting chunks of flesh from the bone and handed them to his lackeys. Forget about the cake. They tore into Tom, ripping chunks off with their teeth and grunting as blood soaked their chins. Wally took out a salt shaker from his pocket and seasoned his meat before taking a huge, satisfying bite. He looked up at me as I stared wide-eyed, pissing myself.

“Want some?” he asked.

* * *

I ran. I didn’t care where. It didn’t matter. *Clap, clop, thud, swish, clop.* The concrete rolled to bash my racing soles. *Get away. Get safe. Get out.* Everywhere I went I saw monsters. Bewildered women shielding their children from my muttering. *The knives, the blood, the ripped, salted*

flesh. Concerned older men trying to stop me. “Hey, pal, are you okay?” *The shrieking. Impossible grins. Black voids where eyes should be.*

I jumped on the bus. Found the first empty seat. Waited. *Thud-dub. Thud-dub. Thud-dub.* I pulled the choking tie away from my throat and tried to catch my breath. People stared. Turned. Waited. *Thud-dub. Thud-dub. Thud-dub.* The next wave of a headache rounded the bend and my vision flashed a pulsing red with each heartbeat. *Thud-dub. Thud-dub. Thud-dub.*

The seat began to feel sticky under my hands and I looked down. Smears of blood-glazed ropes of muscle and sinew invaded my skin. The floor felt like mush under my feet. It pulsed and throbbed along with my aching heart. Rails of flayed bone rattled as we drove over streets built from pitted ribs.

“Stop it!” I wailed. I clawed at my eyes and stood, wavering and unsteady. “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

The pus covered bus driver slammed on the breaks and I rushed the door, stumbling on the curb and falling face first. Everyone in this city of flesh turned to stare silently as I howled in horror. Their putrid, rotting skin fell to the ground. So I ran again. *Slap, shlop, slap, shlop, slap.* The ground slid under my footfalls.

Thud-dub. The world turned gray, bleak, hopeless. *Thud-dub.* The world was flesh, grotesque, trembling. *Thud-dub.* The world was gray again. Concrete and steel rose around me as my headache began to subside. The redness faded, making way for sunlight and sharp cab horns. I don’t know how I made it back to Stari’s home (my home), but I managed to fall through the door into the foyer and curl up on the mat, sobbing.

Stari must have heard the door slam behind me, because moments later she was at my side.

“It’s wrong,” I whimpered, pulling away from her touch. “It’s all wrong. I’m not me. This isn’t real.”

“You’re burning up!” Stari gasped, holding the back of her hand to my forehead. “And you’re soaking through your suit. Come. Come with me,” she said, pulling me by the shoulders.

“No … leave me,” *Thud-dub. Thud-dub. Thud-dub.* I tried to slide across the threshold and to the corner of the room. *The corner is safe. I can see everything from the corner. Safe. Safe.* Stari was stronger than she seemed. She pulled me up from the floor and ushered me into the study,

rich with leather the color of cognac and riddled with books; brown books with gold lettering, each labeled with names I didn't recognize. *Ben Thompson. Elisabeth Draper. Antonio Russo.*

Stari brought me to a comfortable couch and sat me down. She then went to the wall and pulled a book from the shelf. She retrieved a fountain pen from the desk and pressed both into my hands while kneeling. Stari looked me in the eyes, captivating my ragged ramblings and bringing me back to center. Slow breaths. Steadying heart. Pounding head.

"I'm going to call the doctor," she said. "I want you to write everything down — everything that is confusing or odd, anything that you've seen or heard. Anything that you've felt I want you to put it in here so that when the doctor comes, we can sort all of this out, okay Robby? I promise you'll be okay. I'll take care of you."

She rushed off with a *tap-tap-tap.* I took the pen with a sniffle and opened the book. Stark white pages stared back at me. *Right. Write it down. The doctor will come. The doctor will fix it. Write it. Write it now, before I forget. Before I lose my mind.*

I found my focus, putting ink to paper. Even though my head felt about ready to explode, I scratched out the words that I couldn't say out loud. *I saw Stari's head jerk wildly around and her grin become impossibly wide. I watched her eyes roll back into her skull, flash cloudy, and then transform into gaping bloody holes …* Still, the pain grew and grew with each new line. I could hardly hold the pen. I could hardly see the letters. I fought back every excruciating scratch behind my eyes, the battering of brain matter against my forehead, and the ungodly, incessant ringing that just would not quit. My teeth ached, yet I wrote. I wrote while praying for the doctor to arrive. I wrote until the darkness washed over me.

* * *

Stari's heels *tap-tap-tapped* on the floor as she waltzed into the study, clipping dangling diamonds to her precious earlobes; purse on her shoulder. "We're going to be late if we don't get a move on, brother."

Is it time to leave already? I must have nodded off there for a moment.

"I thought we'd go back to *Cazar.* We've been having decent luck there lately." She had dropped her fake accent like a creeper's phone number and focused on swiping on a sparkling pink lip gloss, using her reflection in a large abstract chrome sculpture to guide her hand.

Are you planning on resurrecting that fake mishmash of syllables you call an accent? Stari rolled her eyes at me.

“I like the accent. It makes me feel … exotic when I’m on the hunt.”

The leather bound book had fallen to the floor and she scooped it up, flipping through the pages. She sat on the couch next to me, moving her lips slightly as she read. “This is good. I think this is sellable. With a little polishing, we could make a pretty profit with Robert’s horrific experiences. Maybe it could be an episode on something. Oh, or a film script! We haven’t written one of those in a while.”

She pulled out a golden cigarette case from between the couch cushions and removed a slim white stick, lighting it with the *tink* of a silver lighter. “I especially enjoy the phone call in the middle of the day. That screaming bit about being eaten alive. It works. How’d he take it?”

He wound up on his back in the middle of the floor, how do you think he took it?

I got another eye roll and quick flip of the finger as Stari pulled hard on her cigarette for that smart-ass comment. Slowly the smoke billowed out from Stari’s nose like a dragon as she read on. She stretched out a bit on the backrest. From there I could only see her in my periphery.

Rotating the book to view the spine, Stari looked at the name, newly applied with gold leaf. “Rob Alexander? I thought his name was Robert?”

I liked Rob better. It seemed more fitting.

Stari dropped the book on the coffee table in front of us with a clatter before sliding over to sit on the table’s surface. She pulled a small vial out of her purse. “Time for the *sanguisuga* .” I started to flex, but Stari hesitated. “Look,” she said, “Rob has to be the last one for a while.”

Stari, do we have to discuss this now? I’m hungry.

“And I’m not?” she exclaimed, glaring at me. “You’ve been *gorging* at the all-you-can-eat buffet. Meanwhile, I’ve been surviving on trickling terror. It’s been my turn to get a new host for weeks now. I’m *starving* . Plus, I’ve been having to do all the cleanup. By myself. You need to pick someone and stick with them, okay? It’s your turn to choose victims. I want a new body.”

Fine. I supposed it really had been my turn for a while. *I’m tired of being the chewed up cherry. Be my freakin’ guest.*

I pulled myself free, one fibrous vibrissa at a time, from the last few drops of hormones in Rob’s brain. There was nothing left now. I slowly

slithered down Rob’s dry ear canal into the vial of brain fluid that Stari held in her hand, allowing the husk of Rob to fall and crumble on the floor.

The Lost Mine of St. Eloi
by J. Edwin Buja

The metal trunk was covered with dents and rust. There was no lock on it, so I pulled it to the middle of the floor and opened it. It was filled to the top with old musty clothes. I picked up the top piece of clothing; it was part of an old uniform. Judging by the sergeant's stripes on the sleeves, I guessed it was Grandad's from the Second World War. He'd told me lots of stories of his exploits then and after the war in Berlin. I rummaged through the trunk and removed more pieces of uniform, a couple of helmets, one British and one German; several boxes that contained letters and correspondence between Grandad and Nan, some military records related to Grandad's service, and some medals. I wondered why this stuff was buried out here in the shed instead of being preserved in the house.

As I pondered, I noticed that, though I had removed everything from the trunk, the bottom was only halfway down. Testing the trunk's floor, I found that it was in fact a divider that, once removed, revealed a treasure trove of interesting things.

There was another uniform even older and more tattered that had a shoulder flash indicating the Royal Engineers. A number of leather-bound books turned out to be diaries from 1914 to 1916 and, oddly, from 1945 to 1949. I guessed that the second, newer, set was from Grandad's time in Berlin. A thick bound packet of yellowed letters, still in their envelopes, were from three men: a Major Norton-Griffiths, Christopher Wilberforce, and Lew Jones. In a thinner packet were letters from various high-ranking officers, including one general. A third packet contained three letters, all from a German named Hans Steckler. There was a thick folder bound with red ribbon. Stamped across the top in bold red letters was TOP SECRET. I peeled back the corner of the folder to see what was inside. The first page said it was the Report on the Seventh Mining Tunnel at St. Eloi, Belgium, June 1916. Under the title were the names of the correspondents from Grandad's packets of letters as well as some new names. The last item in the trunk resembled a spade, with a strange blade and broken handle.

Most interesting to me was the sixth name on the Report list: Lance Corporal Wilfred Dawson, 172nd Tunnelling Company of the Royal Engineers.

“Dammit, Reggie, why did you have to pry into my business?”

I nearly wet myself when I heard Grandad’s voice. There was nothing I could do because he’d caught me red-handed going through his things.

“I’m sorry, Grandad. I was curious. Why didn’t you ever tell me you fought in the First World War?”

Grandad looked a little angry but also a bit resigned. I guess whatever he wanted kept secret was secret no longer.

“You might as well pack it all up and bring it in the house. You’ll be wanting an explanation. I’ll put the kettle on.”

I watched him walk into the house. His back was straight and his pace was steady. For a man that was one hundred and two, he showed no signs of slowing. I repacked the trunk but with the First World War stuff on top this time, then carried it into the house. By the time I got there, the kettle had already boiled and Grandad was spooning tea into the pot. He had never taken to tea bags. A plate of digestive biscuits sat next to the steeping tea.

There was a revolver next to Grandad’s place at the table.

I had never seen it before but it looked old. Clearly, he had taken care of it. I could smell the gun oil and the weapon showed no signs of rust or dirt.

With the trunk on the floor next to my chair, I placed the diaries, packets of letters, and the report on the table. We sat in silence until after Grandad had poured our tea.

“What do you want to know, Reggie” he asked. His eyes kept drifting over to the folder with the secret report.

“Everything, Grandad.”

This is what Grandad told me: the story of Lance Corporal Wilfred Dawson

* * *

I was sixteen when the war started. Like everyone else in Britain, I was eager to go off to war and fight the Huns. Rule Britannia and all that rot. At the time, I was living in Manchester and working as a clay kicker for Major Norton-Griffiths. He was a civil engineer and had the contracts to

work on the sewers. The army didn't want me at first, so I stayed in Manchester working for the Major. In February 1915, he closed down our contract in Manchester then took us down to Chatham where we enrolled into the Royal Engineers. Three days later I was in France at the Western Front.

You're probably wondering what a clay kicker is, since they don't use them anymore. Clay kicking was a way to dig tunnels quickly in three-man teams. The Kicker, that was me, lay back on a cross, a kind of stool that could be wedged into a tunnel. I used my feet on the grafter, that's the odd-looking tool in the trunk, to remove a spit of clay from the tunnel face. The Bagger took the clay and put it in sandbags. The Trammer took the sandbags out of the tunnel on a small trolley and came back with timber to shore up the walls. We worked six hour shifts and sometimes took turns doing the jobs. Kicking is murder on the legs and I often needed a break. It was fast. All the teams together could do about twenty feet a day. The German engineers could only do about six. The most important thing about clay kicking was that it was almost silent. The enemy couldn't hear us coming, but we could hear them.

It wasn't an easy job. The tunnels were cramped, wet, cold, and sometimes full of gas. We'd use canaries and mice to tell if there were dangerous gases down there. If the bird kicked over, we'd get the hell out. It was also dangerous because we had to do everything ourselves, including shoring up the tunnel. Since we couldn't use nails (too much noise) timber supports were wedged into place. But there were lots of cave-ins and we lost many good men to accidents.

Things were going well for us. I had a good team. Charlie Smith was a Cockney who kept us laughing. We lost him to trench foot in the summer of '15. Around the same time Charlie went off with bad feet, Harry Trevelyan got himself a dose of the clap. Stupid randy bastard. Anyway, in late summer of '15 I got a new team. Christopher Wilberforce, another bloody Cockney, and Lew Jones, a Welshman who we could barely understand but he worked his arse off.

Shortly after this change, we were sent to St. Eloi near Ypres to help get this Hun strongpoint called the Mound.

That's where things got interesting. We figured out how to outsmart the Huns with our tunnels. The soil around St. Eloi was loam, sand, and clay slurry, crap for digging tunnels. So we went deeper, down to a layer of

blue clay that was perfect for us. Three shafts were sunk and from these shafts we were to dig seven tunnels to make galleries full of explosives under the Hun lines. If you've read your history, you've probably heard that there were six mines set off at St. Eloi. That's true. My team was placing the seventh. That job didn't get finished. In fact, all trace of it was removed except for that report over there.

So around November 1915 we started to kick the clay. We were down deep, maybe sixty feet, under where the Huns were digging. Eventually, when we had tunnelled closer to their lines, we heard their tunnellers above us. They made a hell of a lot of noise because they used mattocks to dig.

In December – it was the fifteenth if I recall correctly, you can check it in my diary – we heard a Hun tunnelling team near us in tunnel seven. We called down one of the Listeners, specialist men who, obviously, listened for enemy activity. He set up his Geophone and took some readings. It was Stevenson, so I knew I could rely on him to be accurate with his findings. After comparing notes with a couple of other Listeners, Stevenson calculated that the Hun team was about twenty feet north of us and perhaps fifteen feet higher. We decided to give them a surprise by digging out a small gallery for a camouflet- that's a small mine that would only destroy things underground but not reach the surface. There were also a couple of small mines on steel rods that we forced into the clay towards the other tunnel that might go off if they got too close. It would give those Hun swine a nasty surprise.

We continued with our own digging.

During the night, the team digging heard one of the smaller mines go off. They stopped work right away and waited to see what would happen. There was nothing but silence for a few minutes, then what they described as a mighty roar. The officers decided that the mine must have killed the enemy team and figured they had no idea that we were responsible.

They chose to ignore the report about the roar. More fool, them.

Our teams didn't get back to digging in tunnel seven for two days, just in case the Huns were down there waiting for us. I was sent to check on things and found nothing. The tunnel was quiet, dark, wet, and stank worse than usual. Clay stinks like a toilet, you know, but this was more like unearthed corpses after a barrage. We resumed digging.

An hour into our shift, we heard digging from our left. It was louder than we had previously heard. We stopped dead and got Stevenson back down to get a bearing. He concluded that the Huns were no more than five feet over and perhaps six feet higher than us. I kicked myself for not coming down more often to check for noises.

The officers ordered us to halt our work and prepare for a breach. With the other team that close, there was a good chance one or the other of us would break through into an enemy tunnel. We couldn't set up a mine gallery because if it went off, we would lose a large section of tunnel seven. Even a torpedo mine would be too risky Therefore, we armed ourselves. There wasn't much we could use in those cramped tunnels but a good sharp bayonet. Each of us was issued a Webley revolver. Several other teams came down to aid us in case of a fight.

We sat in silence waiting for something to happen. None of us could have a cigarette because of the threat of gas. The company captain came down with rum for all of us to help stave off the cold.

Whatever officer was in command of the Hun engineers had not trained them properly. They were noisy and talked a lot. One of our men, Watson, could speak German, but the clay muffled the voices enough to make them unintelligible. Whatever the Huns were doing in their tunnel, they didn't appear to be afraid of discovery. And the nature of the sounds had changed. Instead of the thud of tools striking clay, there now came a sharper sound, like hitting stone.

The sound of mattocks and spades was almost upon us. Stevenson crawled up to the wall as quietly as possible and placed his Geophone against it. Using hand signals, he indicated that the Huns were less than two feet from us. We all prepared ourselves for the inevitable breach.

Then the digging stopped. There was talking and Watson went to the wall to listen in. I still remember what he told us.

"The Huns have found something in their tunnel. It's a large stone slab. I think. It sounds like one of them said it's some kind of trapdoor. Another one, I would guess he's an officer, is telling the man to stop being ridiculous."

For my part, I was totally confused. What would a stone door be doing this far underground? Perhaps we were digging in some long-forgotten ruins.

We readied our revolvers and bayonets.

Watson waved us back. I could hear grinding from the other side of the clay wall, then lots of shouting.

Watson said, “They’ve pulled up the trapdoor. It’s dark inside whatever it is. There’s a very bad smell, like death.” As he said this, the stink permeated the clay and wafted over us. It was truly foul, worse than the rotting bodies we occasionally encountered as we dug.

The shouting got louder, then the screaming started. We froze. Even through the clay wall, the screams telegraphed terror. And pain. Extreme pain.

Watson’s eyes were wide open and he looked scared. “Something pulled some of the Huns through the door. The rest are backing away. Now whatever is in there is coming through. Oh, Christ. They’re panicking.”

We could all hear the screaming, then the shots. Something thumped against the clay wall and it buckled a little. Several of the men shrank back at the thought of the Huns breaking through.

Silence.

Watson, who was clearly shaken by what he had heard and understood, backed away from the wall. “They’re all gone,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean, gone?” I asked. I kept my voice down as well, though I didn’t really know why.

He shook his head. “Gone. There’s no one there now. Or at least, there’s no one there making any sound.”

“What do you think we should do?” asked Wilberforce. From the look on his face, it was obvious he wanted me to order everyone out of the tunnel.

“Lew, go back and get the Captain,” I said. “The rest of you, stay alert and by all that’s holy, stay quiet.”

About ten minutes later, Lew returned with the Captain. After listening to my report, he said, “Break through. See what’s on the other side.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. Whatever was on the other side of the clay wall had done something to the Hun engineers and I didn’t relish the idea of meeting whatever it was.

When I hesitated, the Captain said, “Now, Lance Corporal.”

I nodded to Christopher and Lew, who picked up spades and slowly and quietly began stripping away clay from the wall. Clearly, they didn’t want to break through suddenly and I was glad they had made that

decision. At least we'd have a chance to prepare if there was still something over there.

"Wilf," said Christopher, "the wall's very thin now. Get me a piece of tubing, from one of the torpedo mines."

One of the men ran to the rear gallery and returned with the tube. It was about three feet long. Christopher took it and pushed one end against the thin clay, then twisted. The tube slowly screwed its way through the barrier. When it was all the way through, Christopher said, "Captain, do you want to have a look?"

The Captain didn't look pleased, but he had been put on the spot and couldn't very well refuse in front of the men. He knelt in the muck and placed his eye against the end of the tube.

"There's some light over there," he said. "One of their torches must still be on. But it's an odd colour, a sort of green but, I don't know, sickly if that makes sense." He moved the tube around so he could get a better look around the Hun tunnel. "Christ," he said. "Bodies. Pieces of bodies." He backed away and looked over at me. "I think we had better break through and see what's going on. Have your men do it, Lance Corporal."

Several of the men grabbed spades and joined Lew and Christopher as they cleared away the remains of the clay wall. The stench from the other side got stronger and two of the men vomited, making the stink worse. I pulled out a handkerchief and tied it across my face. It wasn't much of a mask, but it helped. We hadn't been issued gas masks yet and besides, we wouldn't have had them in the tunnel anyway.

As the hole was widened, the green light became more distinct. The Captain was right. It did seem sickly. I can't explain what I mean except to say that when I saw the glow I was nauseated, and not just from the stench. When a hole about four feet across had been opened, the men stood back and looked at the Captain.

"Shit," he said under his breath, undoubtedly regretting that he was the ranking officer. He wouldn't be like the generals and have his men face death while he stayed behind. Would he?

We all waited. The Captain retrieved one of our torches and stood next to the hole. Taking a deep breath, he thrust the torch through, then the top half of his body. Just as quickly, he pulled himself back through and fell to his knees. Even in the dim light of the gallery, I could see that his face was pale. He shook his head as if trying to understand what he had seen.

I picked up the torch and went to the hole then leaned through and placed my hand on the wet and muddy floor of the Hun tunnel. I looked down and gagged. The wetness I felt was the inside of a man's chest. The rest of the man was... somewhere else. I gulped some foul air and gazed around. In the light from the torch and the green glow, I had a good view of the tunnel. Strewn about the floor were body parts, the remains of the Huns. I could see no scorching from an explosion and, indeed, we had heard none, so I assumed the men had somehow been torn apart. The tunnel floor and walls were coated in blood and something else that gave off the green pulsing glow.

Being only eighteen and foolishly brave, I climbed the rest of the way through the hole, careful not to step in the dead man's torso. The tunnel dug by the Huns was quite high. I was able to stand to my full height. As I examined my surroundings, I realized that they had not, in fact, dug all of this out. They had come across a room built of stone within the clay. Their tunnel had broken through a wall about three feet above the ground. Through the broken stone I could see the dull glow from one of their lamps.

A quick check of the floor showed there were no living Huns in the room. As I said, there was blood and slime everywhere. This was mostly around where the Huns had broken through. I went to touch it, but before my hand got too close, I could feel heat emanating from the stuff. Using the bayonet I had with me, I prodded the slime. The end of the weapon where it touched began to melt. I quickly backed away, careful not to step in any puddles lest it burn through my boots.

In the centre of the room was the trapdoor that had caused all the fuss earlier. It was covered with ornate carvings that made no sense to me. There were creatures with tentacles and bat wings doing awful things to men. Runes in some foreign alphabet were carved around the edge of the door. Looking at the thing made me shiver and I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible.

"Dawson, what have you found?" the Captain asked. I turned to see that he had not come through the hole in the clay but had remained in our gallery. The rest of the men were huddled behind him, trying to get a look in.

"Lots of pieces of Hun, sir. Blood. Some greenish muck that's giving off that glow. It also melts metal. And a door in the floor covered with

incomprehensible carvings. Nothing living."

"Alright, Dawson, come out of there. We'll report it to the higher ups and let them decide what to do."

As I moved towards the hole and back to the safety of our gallery, I heard a noise behind me. It was coming from the Hun tunnel. I stepped closer to our gallery and pulled out my Webley. There was a shadow. Someone or something was coming into the room. I cocked my revolver.

The sound of movement stopped. Then I heard, "British Tommy, I speak English. Don't shoot me, please. I am unarmed." Whoever he was, he had a German accent though his English was excellent.

"Hands up, you Hun bastard," I said. I shouted back to my fellows in the gallery, "Looks like we have a survivor. Be ready to shoot."

Hands waved through the opening. There was the grey of a German uniform. A head peeked around. He was trying to smile but I could see he was afraid.

"Please, can I come in without being shot? And please can we get the Hell out of here?"

I motioned for him to enter. When he was standing before me, I looked him over. Just a regular soldier like me, about my age, too. There was a new smell and I noticed that he had pissed himself. When he saw me look, he said, "I shit myself as well. Can we get out of here?"

"Why the hurry?" I said.

He gazed over at the door. "It might come back and I don't want to be here if it does."

"What?"

He pointed at the pieces of his comrades, "What did that."

I waved my revolver in the direction of our gallery and he walked over. The men backed away but kept their weapons trained on him, though I doubted he could do much to a dozen men in such a cramped area. Unless he had a grenade.

"Wait, Hun. Got any grenades?"

He looked back at me. "My name is Hans and what the hell would I be doing with a grenade in a tunnel? Don't be an idiot."

I was sorely tempted to shoot him right there. But I also wanted to laugh because he made sense. When he was in our gallery, I joined the men with a quick look back at the door.

“Perhaps it would be a good idea to seal up the hole,” said Hans. “Just in case. You know.”

I didn’t, but Lew and a couple of the others used some setts to block off the hole.

The Captain said, “Let’s get this man back to the tunnel entrance where we can interrogate him. You two,” he pointed at a couple of men from one of the other kicker teams, Robinson and Wilson, “stay here and keep watch.” They didn’t look happy.

We gathered at the tunnel entrance and the Captain interrogated our prisoner.

“I am Corporal Hans Steckler. I’m a Pioneer, er, engineer, with the Imperial German Army. That’s all you need to know.”

“What happened back there?” asked the Captain.

Steckler looked nervous then started. “We were tunnelling to set a mine under your lines.” He shrugged. “You’re doing the same to us. We broke through into that room yesterday. There was that trapdoor in the floor. Today one of the officers decided to open it.” He went pale. “Could I have a drink of water, please?”

I gave him my canteen.

“We managed to lift the trapdoor and prop it open. Then we were assailed with the most unholy smell. Beneath the trapdoor was nothing. Just blackness. No stairs, no walls, just black. We lowered a torch and it showed we were on the ceiling of a gigantic cavern. It was impossible to see the walls. But there were noises.”

He sat silently for a moment.

“There was a dull roar and flapping. Two of the men leaned in to get a better look. Before we could do anything, they screamed and were dragged down. We heard them screaming and crying for help then there was a loud crunch and silence. We backed away from the trapdoor, but something followed. It oozed through the opening as if it was made of black liquid then reformed itself in the room. It stank. Eyes formed all over its body, if you can call it a body. It was just a mass of pulsing green slime.”

“We heard shots,” said the Captain.

Steckler nodded. “Yes, we tried to shoot it but the bullets were absorbed. Tentacles shot out of the thing and wrapped around some of the men. They tightened and the men... burst. The thing then drew their bodies back into a mouth that formed in the middle of the mass. It was just a

gaping black hole. It ate the men. And the green slime dripped off the thing and burned anything it touched."

I shivered.

"We panicked and tried to escape. I was at the back and managed to get into our tunnel but the rest ..." He swallowed then took another drink. "The thing grew more tentacles that swept all over the room. The others were caught and torn apart. Nothing could stop it. I tripped in the tunnel and looked back in time to see the thing recede back through the trapdoor. It had men wrapped in tentacles that it pulled along. Their screams were hideous. One of them saw me and I could see the pleading in his eyes before the mouth closed around his head. The timber propping open the trapdoor fell away and the entrance to the cavern was closed. I fainted."

"Bollocks," said the Captain. "What really happened?"

Steckler shook his head. "Not bollocks, Captain. The truth. Something is down there and it is dangerous. We must block off the entrance before it comes back."

"Don't tell me what we must do, you Hun bastard," said the Captain.

Before he could say anything more, Wilson came hurrying up to us.

"Sir, there's noise from the other side of the wall. Something's hammering on the trapdoor. Robinson went in to have a look. "

Steckler stood and said, "I must get away. You, too."

"Sit down," said the Captain. He stood for a few moments trying to decide what to do. Then he said, "Right, men. Let's get back there and see what this thing is all about."

I have to admit that I wasn't pleased with the idea of going back. I'd seen the carnage and the burning slime. But as I said before, I was young and fearless. We all went back to the gallery and I'm sure none of us had a clue what we were going to do.

We dragged Steckler back with us.

As we got closer to the gallery, the stench intensified. There was no sign of Robinson. And that sickly green glow was coming from the room.

"He was here when I left, sir," said Wilson quietly.

We milled about while the Captain stood silently. Obviously, he had no idea what to do.

"Bugger this," I said, "Robinson probably needs help." I knew that Robinson was most likely dead like the Huns. Stepping through to the

room, I saw that the trapdoor was open. Next to it was a British army-issue boot with a bloody bone sticking out of it. Robinson.

Trying not to shit myself, I cautiously approached the opening. I could hear flapping and crunching from within the darkness. Looking back at the men, I motioned for them to remain silent. Fearless and stupid. That was me. I stepped closer to the opening and looked in.

The cavern that Steckler had described was clearly visible now, bathed in that green light. But it must have been immense. I could only see the cavern wall directly below me. The other walls were lost in the blackness. Far below, maybe two hundred feet, I could see the cavern floor. It was littered with bones and pieces of men.

On the wall were gigantic carvings; amorphous blobs with tiny bat wings, more of those foreign-looking runes. There were other creatures depicted, though I hesitate to call them creatures because they resembled nothing I had ever seen. I could only guess that they were the product of some hideous nightmare. Everywhere there were depictions of men being herded, eaten, and worshiping the creatures that were devouring them. Some carvings showed human sacrifices.

While I surveyed the cavern, I became aware of a sound slowly approaching. It was as if something gigantic was being dragged across pavement. It seemed to be coming from the depths of the darkness. I quickly returned to the Captain.

“Sir, it got Robinson and it’s coming back,” I said.

“What is it?” asked the Captain.

“I don’t know, sir, but it’s big. Too big for us. I suggest we follow the Hun’s suggestion and block the entrance off before it’s too late.” As I spoke, there came a distant roar. Steckler whimpered.

The Captain just stood there. He didn’t know what to say, so I took charge.

“Lew, take some men and get some camouflets. The rest of you, start piling setts near the hole so we can block it off.” I turned to Steckler. His eyes were wide with fear. “Steckler, do you have any explosives close by in your tunnel?”

He nodded. “Several crates about twenty meters along.”

“Come with me,” I said and went back into the room. Steckler followed and we went along the tunnel until we found the cache of explosives. It suddenly occurred to me that we might encounter Steckler’s

comrades, come to see what happened, but there were no sounds coming from the Hun tunnel.

Steckler must have understood what I was thinking because he said, “When we found the room with the door, the officers ordered everyone to stay out. They only let a few of us back to explore. There’s no one left to give the order to return.”

“Good,” I said, “Fewer witnesses.”

Steckler and I dragged the explosives back to the room. We piled them just inside the break in the wall made by the Hun engineers. I went back with small mines to lay them along the tunnel to make sure there was no easy way to find the room again.

My team had placed our mines along the clay wall in our gallery. Like me, they had determined that the tunnel should be destroyed. Steckler and I set the German mines and headed back to our gallery. Before we got there, there was an unholy roar from within the cavern. Whatever was coming was getting closer.

“Help me with this,” I said to Steckler as I tried to lift the trapdoor back into place and block off the cavern.

We had the trapdoor about six inches from being closed when I saw movement in the cavern. An eye the size of my head suddenly opened and stared at me. It felt like it was looking into my soul. In that instant, I knew that whatever ancient monsters dwelt within the cavern and its surrounding environs viewed humans as nothing more than cattle. I felt my own bowels release but was too afraid to care.

Steckler and I let go of the trapdoor and it crashed closed just in time to slice off a tentacle that had whipped through the opening. It wrapped itself around my ankle and I could instantly feel the heat as it began to burn through the leather of my boot. Steckler grabbed a nearby spade and slashed at the tentacle until it fell away. I was in agony and could barely stand, but Steckler helped me back through to our gallery.

The men set the mines and we raced to the imagined safety of the tunnel. We didn’t stop until we were standing at the top of the vertical shaft. The Captain was still in shock, so I took the initiative and detonated the mines. There was a dull thud as the explosives went off and a rush of hot, stinking air blew out of the tunnel.

When the dust settled, we reported to Major Norton-Griffiths. We told him everything and though he was skeptical at first, he came to believe us.

We were all sworn to secrecy upon threat of court martial and, as I learned later, the Major did not pass the report along to his superiors. He simply stated that there had been an accident in tunnel seven that had cost the life of one of our men.

Those of us that had witnessed the events in the tunnel were sent away for two weeks of leave before returning for duty. Christopher, Lew, and I survived the war but the rest of the men, including the Captain, were lost a few months later when a mine went off prematurely.

I stayed in contact with Christopher and Lew simply to make sure we all stayed sane after what we witnessed. The Major met with us regularly to assure us that the facts surrounding the destruction of tunnel seven were never revealed. If you read any accounts of the war around St. Eloi, you'll find no mention of a seventh tunnel.

Steckler was happy to go off to a prisoner of war camp back in Britain and after the war we kept in touch. I owed him my life for getting that tentacle off my leg. Neither of us spoke about what we had seen in the cavern, but we understood that we had a bond that could never be broken. The rest of the men who had been down there hadn't seen the creature.

I tried to live quietly after the war, but what happened nagged at me. When the chance came to serve in Berlin in 1945, I jumped at it because it gave me the opportunity to check German records to see if anyone on their side had reported the incident. As it happened, Steckler was the only German who had survived the tunnel, so the secret was safe.

* * *

Grandad sat back when he was finished and took a sip of tea. I could see he was tired.

I was still skeptical. The whole story seemed fantastic and I thought it odd that Grandad could remember it so clearly. However, I came to believe him after reading the report and the letters from his comrades. And after he showed me the tentacle scars on his ankle.

I was curious about why he had kept the revolver in such good condition. After all, it would be of no use against the creature if Grandad ever encountered it again.

When I asked about it, Grandad shrugged and said, "The gun's not for the creature, Reggie. It's for me, so I don't have to face it again. Ever since that day, I've had nightmares about it. That thing looked into my soul. And

Steckler’s. We’re connected and it knows I’m still around. I can’t help but feel that it’s still coming for me.”

Three weeks later, Grandad was dead. Everyone thought he had just given up on life after living for one hundred and two years. Me, I knew the truth. Why else would he have shot himself with his old revolver?

I took Grandad’s trunk because no one else cared about it. Over the last few weeks, I’ve reread the report and letters.

Now I have a gun and I’ve started having nightmares.

It is a Long Walk to the Ocean
by K. H. Vaughan

“Why is this happening?” Clay cried out. “It hurts so much.”

We’d been on fire for days.

No one knew why.

Me, my brother, and everyone we’d met since it came over us in the night a couple days back. We looked like embers shrouded in smoke, glowing deep and red as bits of char scabbed over on our forms, cracked, and fell away to ash, mixing with the dust and sand and ash all over everything. We remained unconsumed, but that didn’t make it hurt any less.

We’d been camped in the mountains, surrounded by scrubby pine and the eroded peaks of what had been volcanoes once way back, most of it worn down to islands of rock and scree on the high plateau. The night sky was big and open and seemed to go on forever.

Sometime in the night we woke up, screaming and alight like brands. We jumped around, trying to put each other out until we figured out it wasn’t making any difference. I don’t know why, but I pulled on my boots before we started walking. They smoldered until they fell off my feet and I left the scraps behind smoking on the trail.

It took us until late to make it back to town. Here and there we’d see someone walking in the flat desert hardpan, alone or in small groups. Sometimes just sitting out there flickering like a campfire. Coming into town, we could see that most of the buildings that could burn had done so. As we reached the first houses there was a fella running around screaming, flames whipping off his back behind him like streamers. I might have known him, but couldn’t really say. He finally scrambled over a fence into someone’s back yard and jumped into the swimming pool. The water hissed and bubbled. The thrashing eventually stopped and the fire died and after a while he floated face down on the surface. The weight of his bones pulled against the burned flesh until they tore free and sank to vanish in the cloudy bottom. I imagined all the pools, the lakes, the oceans, all over

the world, all a stew of charred remains, black burned bits floating in a slick of rendered fat.

“Well,” I said. “There’s that, at least.”

* * *

The pharmacy was a shell. People staggered through the wreckage trying to find anything to ease the pain: aloe vera, lidocaine, cold packs. They argued over items and called back and forth to see if anyone had found something that worked. Their lamentations flowed together to create a confluence of noise, meaningless and unheard.

As we watched, a man sat on the floor of the hair care aisle surrounded by a heap of smoldering packages and melted plastic bottles, squeezing a pale green ribbon of shampoo onto his leg. He howled in pain while it bubbled and flowed off his thigh like mercury. When it had finished, he took another bottle from the shelf and did it again, to the same effect, and dropped the melting bottle onto the pile of melted bottles at his side.

The people in the store were all miserable and without answers, no matter what they tried, so we moved on. Didn’t look like there was a whole lot left in any case. As we left, we heard the man from the shampoo aisle howl one last time.

We made our way slowly, painfully, to the ball field by the high school. I hadn’t been there in ten years or more. Back when I was in school, I used to smoke cigarettes there with Javi Estrada and Pud Johnson. I don’t know why we ended up there. Somehow, getting a little shelter over our heads before sundown made sense.

“You know, they got a independent league team playing here now?” Clay said.

“That right?”

“I guess they ain’t playing no more, huh?”

“I wouldn’t think.”

A cinder flared and fell away from Clay’s cheek. Our smoke rose up to curl in the rafters. The paint on the wooden seats blistered and smoked against our backs, but I figured they wouldn’t burn out from under us so long as we sat still with our bodies pressed against them. If I was wrong, the place wasn’t anywhere near capacity.

“How come you quit?” I said. “You was just starting to get good at it.”

“I guess I got interested in other things.”

“I thought you might have got hurt or something.”

“No, it wasn’t anything like that. Just, other things to do. I wasn’t gonna make the pros or nothing. Anyhow, if you kept in touch better, Zeke, you would have known that.”

That was fair. I’m seven years older than Clay, and he would have been twelve when I lit out. I never did call or write home much. It would be fifteen years before I walked into that house again for our father’s funeral. A few months later and now all of this.

The sun flared on the horizon in the west and went dark. Buildings in town collapsed and sent up sparks toward the sky. People on fire ran across the open fields leaving tiny flames in their wake that burned until they smoldered out and died. It was like a vast constellation of tiny stars on the plain, flickering dimly, new stars being born and old ones dying in turn.

“Do you think we’re dead?” he said.

“Don’t feel like it,” I said. “It ain’t how I ever heard of being dead anyway.”

He nodded, sparks jumping away from his head as he moved.

“Maybe some sort of divine retribution?” he said. “Like out of Revelations?”

“Retribution for what?”

“For our sins.”

“No. I never did believe that stuff. Not since I was little.”

“I don’t either, I guess. Looked like all the churches were burned up like everything else, anyhow.”

We sat silently in the dark, the only light at all coming from the fires out beyond the fence and ourselves. The orange glow cast strange shadows all around us.

“There’s probably a logical explanation,” Clay said.

“I’m all ears.”

“Ain’t saying I know what it is.”

* * *

It’s hard to sleep when you are on fire, and the night was long. The town burned down to a dim glow, sparks and half-burned bits of paper rising up into the air in plumes. All the bank notes and contracts and every kind of record. Books and photographs too. Any memories we want to keep from here on out, we’ll have to hold onto ourselves.

Sometime after midnight, Clay started like he woke up and said, “I bet the cities are a real mess, ain’t they? Like Ground Zero on nine-eleven except everywhere and nobody inside.”

* * *

In the morning, we got up and walked back out into the street. It hurt to move and it hurt to not move. It didn’t seem to matter either way, so we grit our teeth and set out. The sun was bright and there were no clouds, but there was a thick haze of smoke over everything that dimmed the light. We stopped in the remains of a convenience store and I swatted packs of cigarettes around until I got a bunch loose and held them to my face with both hands. I couldn’t get much of the smell of it over the smoke all around me. I wasn’t even sure if I could smell it, or just remembered how it was supposed to smell. There was a liquor store down the street that looked intact, but I was afraid of what alcohol would do to us.

“You know, I thought I saw Principal Jerome last night,” Clay said.

“How could you tell?”

“From the general body shape, I guess? I didn’t get a close look.”

“Could be about anyone then.”

“He always had that whistle from being a gym coach. Used to blow it in the hallways? Damn, that was loud. One time, he took Delmar Oats by the ear and dragged him down to the office even though he was six foot and a senior.”

“Never did pay to mess with Principal Jerome.”

* * *

All around town, the wooden buildings were gone. Nothing left but brick shells and steel rafters twisted out of shape. People wandered around, rudderless. Some tried to stick to their daily routine, some prayed. Most just wandered around confused, trying to find someone to tell them what was happening. We saw a woman, we didn’t recognize who, scurrying from hiding place to hiding place down the street, trying to cover herself with her arms.

“You still worrying someone’s gonna see your goodies?” I said.

“You got no call to do that,” Clay said. “You don’t know her situation.”

“She’s burning like the flare stack on an oil rig, same as us.”

“Don’t mean it affects her the same though.”

“I guess,” I said, and turned back towards the column of smoke retreating behind a low wall. “Hey! I’m sorry I said that. That wasn’t right of me to say.”

If she heard me, she didn’t respond in any way, so we continued on.

We wandered more, through the streets we’d rode bikes through when we were kids. We picked up a baseball and tossed it back and forth until the seams burned through and it came apart. We walked the rail line where I remembered putting pennies on the rail and waiting for a train to come, and collecting those small bits of copper all flattened and spread out so that they looked like the scales of some kind of magical beast.

Down the line we spotted someone tangled up in a wire fence. He hung there, not moving or making any effort to get free. We stared at him for a while. If a train had come, I don’t know that we would have heard it over our own thoughts.

“What do you wanna do?” I said.

“I don’t really know,” Clay said. “Doesn’t seem like there’s anything to be done, you know?”

“We’ll probably all burn out eventually.”

“Yeah.”

The fellow in the wire let out a noise that sounded like sobbing, then a dolorous cry, so long and empty that you wouldn’t think a human being could make it.

“I’d like to see the ocean again, one more time,” Clay said. “We could head down to Presidio, maybe? Follow the river down to the Gulf? Something like that.”

“I’m all for not waiting around here, at least. We go down through Big Bend and Coahuila we’ll have to cross the river, if I remember right.”

Clay didn’t respond to that, so eventually I said “Well, I guess we can work that out when we get there.”

We left the man hanging in the fence, and went looking for a ride. It wasn’t long before we found an old truck with a good tank of gas and the keys in it. There would be ranches with manual pumps to refill out there, but we weren’t sure how pumping gas would work under the circumstances. We laid down some roof tin to keep the seats from burning up under us right away. I wasn’t sure it would start, but it did. There was something a little reassuring about that. The engine sounded strange

though. Everything else was just occasional screaming or the clicks and groans of metal cooling. Even the animals were quiet.

We got to the edge of town and there was small form hiding behind a rollaway dumpster.

“Is that a kid?” Clay said. “Hey, buddy!”

The small burning form started and ran toward a brick house with a mobile home parked in the driveway.

“We can’t leave him here,” Clay said.

“What do you want to do? What can we do for him?”

“I don’t know. I wish we could do something.”

“Well, he’s gonna have to sort this all out by himself like everybody else.”

“We got each other. He don’t even have that much.”

* * *

It was a quiet drive through the dry flatland toward Mexico. No traffic. Nothing to see for miles except creosote scrub. Here and there, bits of ash drifted delicately in the air like snowflakes or eiderdown. Clay tried to find something on the radio but there were no signals to tune in. Eventually the knob melted off in his hand and he gave up.

“I figured there’d at least be an emergency broadcast or someone with a ham radio or a pirate set-up out there,” he said.

“Could be. I don’t know what frequencies that thing picks up.”

“You know, you’ve gotten pretty calm about all of this.”

“What else am I supposed to do? Can’t change it.”

“I always admired that about you.”

“I was never sure whether I was accepting things or just giving up.”

The seats gave off acrid smoke that started to fill the cab so we drove with the windows down and the fire coming off us guttered in the wind. Even then it was hard to see between the smoke and the flames in my face. We smashed out the back window of the cab with a rock, which helped the ventilation but whipped the flames in my eyes even worse, so it was slow going. By the time we reached Presidio we decided it made more sense to walk.

“It’s about six hundred miles to Brownsville,” I said. “If we can make twenty miles a day that’s thirty days.”

“What if we go west?”

“Maybe about the same. In miles anyhow.”

“Well, I guess we ain’t got anyplace special we have to be. Go west?”

“That’s what our folks did in the old days and it never did them any good.”

“Maybe they didn’t go far enough.”

“Yeah. They picked some hard country to land in, didn’t they? I don’t know about that Sonoran Desert though. If we go east, we can follow the river. At least we won’t get lost.”

* * *

Presidio was mostly the same stuff as all the other West Texas towns we’d lived in growing up, following our father in his erratic efforts at employment. Dusty, low-slung buildings, beat up by the wind and the sun. Fan palms lined the roads, tall and aloof, with thick brown petticoats of dead leaves hanging from beneath their crowns of bright green fronds. I did not know if they were Californian or Mexican palms, or if that distinction even mattered anymore. Either way I did not confess my ignorance. Every wooden structure had burned here as well, and people were just as on fire and confused as everywhere else.

“Shit, there ain’t much down here, is there?” I said.

“You know, they shot that John Wayne movie here? *Rio Bravo* ? With Ricky Nelson and Dean Martin plays that drunk sheriff?” Clay said.

“I thought Mitchum played the drunk sheriff in that.”

“That was *El Dorado* . It’s the same movie though.”

“How can it be the same movie? Ain’t but the one drunk sheriff in it.”

“Well, they made one and then they made it again. You remember watching all those old westerns? The old man would watch them all day when he could.”

“Too drunk to get out of that damned chair.”

“He still watched them though.”

* * *

We set off toward Big Bend. As we were leaving town a man came out from behind a sagging mud-plaster wall holding a metal pipe in his hand.

“Hey, you got anything?” he said.

We stood there staring at each other for a minute.

“Are you… are you trying to rob us?” Clay said. “What do you think we got to steal?”

“You haven’t thought this through, fella,” I said.

“I don’t know what else to do with all this,” he said.

“Go jump in the damned river then.”

He sort of slumped a bit and didn’t say anything for a while.

“I’m afraid to,” he said, and staggered off. We watched him wander off back up toward town. A gust blew dust and smoke across the ground and he about fell over when it reached him, but he kept going.

“I mean, what’s the point of that?” Clay said.

“What’s the point of any of it?” I said.

It took four days to get to the ferry crossing at Boquillas. The highway was smooth and gentle, and sometimes carved through the rock. You could see the layers in it like the pages of a petrified phone book, listing a history that was long over before people ever came to be. The Rio Grande on our right, brown and muddy and sometimes a slick of oily ash carried on the surface. Most of them small, but not always. Once, a long dark film passed by, clotted with charred blobs, and we sat and watched it pass for at least an hour.

“They must have walked in all together, like a baptism?” Clay said. “I wonder if they were saved.”

“They aren’t suffering at least. This burning thing ain’t pleasant.”

“Do you think we’re doing the right thing?”

“I don’t know. I guess that’s never held me back before.”

We walked around the Terlingua ghost town for a while and camped for the night there. There were so few people around when this started that the wooden buildings were still standing. I didn’t want to stay, but Clay wanted to explore.

“Just don’t fall down some old mineshaft where you can’t get out,” I said. “A rope will burn through before I can pull you up.”

I peeked in the windows of a gift shop and small hotel. There was no one around, so whoever was here must have lit out. Shelves of mugs, crafts, and jars of penny candy. Hats and t-shirts. It was the first store I had seen undisturbed since this began. It was somehow disquieting to me, and I turned away and walked to get some distance from it.

I sat on a low rock wall and waited for Clay to return. Small birds took dust baths in the drifting ash, shivering it off their backs. That night, we

sheltered in the remaining walls of a tumbled-down adobe brick shack left from the old days, the sky open above us, the ground hard and cold.

The next day, by Lajitas, we passed a golf resort. It was all brand new like it had just opened, but built to give the impression of an age and history that it had not, itself, earned. A woman wandered aimlessly out front, and when we got close she lurched toward us.

“Um, hello?” she said. She had some kind of nasal East Coast accent. “Is this hell?”

“No Ma’am,” Clay said. “Still just Texas.”

“Oh,” she said, and then resumed wandering.

Horses grazed placidly on the roughs and greens, and there was a single figure carrying a fistful of clubs. We watched while he drove a ball down the fairway, picked up his clubs again and walked after the ball. There were paths of footprints burned across the different holes, like he’d been playing over and over. He saw us and waved. We waved back and moved on.

At Boquillas, the river was no more than knee-deep, but we didn’t want to chance wading across, afraid our legs would come apart beneath us and we would collapse. It would be over then, and only whatever remaining ash and grease the river carried would reach our destination.

There was little at the crossing at all, just a shelter for burros, tire tracks, and whatever garbage was left behind. We took a flat-bottomed aluminum jon boat and rowed. It was only a few minutes, and there was no customs agent to welcome us into Mexico. The walk through the rugged cliffs and valleys along route 53 was long and we didn’t speak much. The sun beat down on the bleached rocks and dust. At least on the road, we wouldn’t catch anything on fire as we passed. As dry and sparse as this country was, here and there, in eroded cracks and tiny draws, one could see tiny plants that would give forth the most arresting wildflowers in their time, ephemeral though that would be.

Each morning we woke, to the extent that we really even slept in the night, and walked until we couldn’t walk anymore. It was slow and we gritted our teeth against the pain, whether we were moving or still. Every day was pain, and every day the same.

* * *

I don’t have words to describe the landscape as we walked for days on the highway through the rough rocky country in the edges of the Sierra Del Carmen. Such a dry and thirsty land. There were times when it looked to me like we were on the moon, or even mars, with the strange formations. Higher up, thousands of feet above our heads, the angular mountains hosted islands of trees and birds, but they were out of reach. I felt like we were slowing down. Maybe ten miles a day. Once I felt so ill that I had to kneel down by the side of the rode and vomited ash in clumps onto the rocks. I crawled to a wide slab in the sun and curled into a ball. I wanted shade, but was afraid the heat from the fire would fracture off a chunk of the overhang and crush me. Or worse, pin me there, unable to move or die. These were my concerns.

Maybe I dozed.

When I opened my eyes, Clay was sitting on the edge of the slab, watching me.

“What?” I said.

“I was just thinking about the old man,” he said. “You weren’t here when the cancer started to eat him. He got so thin. I always remember him as a big man, but it wasn’t true at the end, at all. I was right there. I don’t know where you were, but I was right there. His breathing got all shallow and would stop, and I’d think he was gone, but then he’d take another few breaths. Until he didn’t no more. He asked for you in the end. I didn’t have anything to tell him.”

“I didn’t have anything to tell him either.”

“God damn, you always gotta get the last word, don’t you?”

“That’s alright, you go ahead.”

“Alright then.”

“You see? I didn’t mind at all.”

We fought, bits of charred skin and bone flying off our fists and cheekbones until we were spent and panting. Clay turned back down the road and after a short while I continued after him. We did not speak again until we started to walk downhill, into the wetter, greener country east of the mountain spine. By the time we approached San Juan de Sabinas, it had begun to rain.

* * *

“Damn, that stings like hell,” Clay said. “I don’t think I can go much farther today. It hurts more as you keep at it with this rain.”

It wasn’t raining hard, but the drops stung like being shot with a pellet gun, and the water hissed off our skin. There would be plenty of shelter in town ahead, but I looked at the clouds and grew afraid. If it rained hard enough, would this be the end of us, right here? I started toward the remains of a roadside restaurant called Casa de Rana y Polo. The roof and interior was burned away, but the walls remained. In the kitchen sat the steel shell of a small walk-in refrigerator.

“What if the door closes? Won’t we suffocate in there?” Clay said.

“I don’t know. I think this rain is gonna get worse though.”

We took twenty minutes to drag some steel shelving racks out to make room and left the door ajar but propped with a cinderblock. The wind blew a little rain in, but it was the best we were going to do. Even as we burned and the smoke billowed thick against the top of the freezer it was dark and cold.

“How in the hell can it be cold?” Clay said.

“It just is,” I said.

“Wish I had a blanket or something.”

“God damn, you complain a lot.”

“My teeth are about chattering. You telling me you ain’t cold?”

“Alright. Here. You lean in against me and maybe we can keep warm together.”

We huddled there against each other and listened to the rain rattle on the shell of the freezer and the steel countertops and equipment in the kitchen with hard metallic raps. Outside, we could hear occasional screams or people calling out in Spanish.

“You know, I keep thinking about that boy we left behind,” he said.

“No use doing that now,” I said.

“I know. But I still do. I wonder how he’s making out.”

* * *

We found bicycles with heavy leather seats and made for the coast, riding standing up as much as we could to try and save the seats. At first, we raced, yelling and laughing even though it still hurt. To see green poking through the ash mud and at least some of the smoke out of the air, riding side by side was a balm. In time, the flames cooked the grease from

the chains and melted the back tires, and when one bike seized up we took turns pedaling while the other rode on the back pegs until that bike failed too. We were on the highway, so we had to walk after that.

In a field, there were ponies at play, their flesh rippling and glistening in the sunlight, jostling and bumping each other for dominance.

“You think you coulda whipped the old man?” Clay said.

“In a fist fight?”

“Yeah.”

“When he was old, maybe. But then he wouldn’t have fought fair.”

“You remember the first time we fought?”

“You were trying to hang out with me and my buddies and you wouldn’t go home. You being younger. When you was a kid, that’s all you ever wanted was someone to play with. I didn’t understand that at the time.”

“Bloodied my nose. I ran home crying and snotty.”

“I got whupped good when I got home, too. Guess I got mine.”

“Ain’t the same.”

“How’s that?”

“Your old man is supposed to whup you. Your big brother ain’t.”

“No. I guess you’re right. I gave you a hard time when we were kids. Never treated you right.”

“Shit rolls downhill. You got the scars to prove that.”

“Not sure I do, anymore. I think the skin is all burned away. Anyway, I’m sorry for everything I did, and also for running off like I did and leaving you with him all by yourself.”

“You were just a kid yourself.”

“Being a big brother, though. That’s supposed to mean something.”

* * *

We had planned to go to San Padre Island, but ended up going through Matamoros to Playa Bagdad. The beach was quiet, with only a few others sitting alone or in small groups, the wind blowing hard off the ocean, whipping the flames behind them in long trails. Each of them guttering like torches but not going out. The sand stung. Gulls turned, hovering and trying to advance against the wind. They could make no progress.

“Never seen them have so much trouble landing,” I said. “All that time I was working up and down the Gulf.”

“I think they’re just being careful? They get close to the ground and the wind changes. They don’t want to nose dive and get wrecked.”

“I guess you’re right.”

The ocean spread out so far and wide with a scum of greasy ash at the high tide mark, like the remains of an oil spill. There was no telling how many had gone before us, or how many remained. Out beyond the filthy tide, farther than we would ever be able to reach, it looked like the film dissipated. There would be dolphins and tarpon out there. I had worked on crab and oyster boats, and on oil rigs in the gulf, in the time I was away from home. I had seen whales surface lazily through luminous shoals of plankton in the darkness, miles from the lights of the shoreline. It was as far from the empty deserts of my childhood as I had had the courage to go. We sat and watched the water as the sun drifted slowly across the sky.

“Well,” I said, after a time. “You want to take a swim out there?”

“I can’t yet,” Clay said. “I can’t watch you go and I don’t want to be alone out here.”

“All right. Maybe we’ll just sit a while. Watch them waves.”

“Family is supposed to stick together.”

“We never did. But we are now at least.”

“Never gonna know what this is, are we?”

“You can’t put words on the impossible. I don’t know why you even try.”

“I know they don’t really work, but it’s all we got.”

We sat, burning and in pain, but together, and watched the infinite and inscrutable sea.

It is enough, for now.

The Promised Death of Zebediah Dewey

by John Goodrich

Rain blasted down, the sun lost below the horizon. But someone was pounding at his door anyway. “Dr. Rehmer! Dr. Rehmer!”

Doctor Eugene Rehmer didn’t recognize the voice right off, but he was not about to let an opportunity go to waste. He flicked the light switch; not surprised to find the electricity out. In the year of Our Lord, nineteen hundred and twenty-six, matches and kerosene were required to make reliable light in the remote factory town of Gideon, Vermont. He fumbled for some matches and lit the wick of a hurricane lamp. Most days, though, he didn’t miss Pennsylvania.

Still in his dressing gown, he pulled open the door. Sarah Blackington stood there, somewhat to his disappointment. Sarah was a sturdy New England farm wife in her forties. Not who he’d been hoping for.

“Come in,” he said. She bustled into his office, shaking the water off her oilskin.

“Ol’ Zebediah Dewey’s been struck by lightning.” Mrs. Blackington was soaked to the skin. “You have to see him.”

“Is he still alive?”

“Only barely. He needs you, Doctor.”

The wind and rain hammered at the shuttered windows. Rehmer sighed. This was his responsibility, like it or not.

“I’ll have to go get dressed, please don’t touch anything while I’m gone.”

“Of course, Doctor.”

Leaving her in his examination room, he went to dress, knowing that whatever he wore would get soaked. On a night like this, nothing would be proof against the driving rain. And his reliable Oakland Six, the best-looking car in town, was going to get muddy. But this was his obligation.

* * *

“I don’t believe I’ve been to Dewey’s place,” he said over the clatter of rain on the windshield. The Oakland Six’s wipers kept up, but only just. Gideon’s streets were dark, and everyone with a lick of sense had taken shelter. And yet here he was.

“It’s at the far end of Dewey Lane,” Sarah said. “It’s an old farm, been falling down for generations. Still lives in the house, though. Just keep down the road, you can’t miss it.” That was fine. He knew where Dewey Lane was. He turned down the main street of Gideon. The packed dirt ran with several inches of muddy water. Someday, the paving-men would come to this little corner of the state. But not, he expected, soon.

“Who found him?” he asked.

“Nehemiah Killigg thought he saw a bear and headed off after it, just before the storm broke. When the rain started, he was near the Dewey place. A lightning bolt struck close by, and when he could hear again, someone was crying out in pain. He found old Zebediah with his clothes still smoking.”

Rehmer tried to remember if he had ever met Dewey. There were a couple of families with the Dewey name, all of whom paid their bills in chickens, eggs, or cheese. But that came with the job when you were a country doctor. He had other compensations. He looked toward the two woolen mills and the tannery that provided the majority of the employment in town. They were small compared to the sprawling edifices in Scranton, but they dominated Gideon’s town center.

He turned onto the lane, but Sarah told him to stop.

“I won’t be going with you,” she said. “Go to the end of the lane, you can’t miss it. But you should know that there’s nothing good that comes from the Dewey place.”

He wanted to ask her what she meant, but she was out the door and into the rain before he could open his mouth. He laid a hand on the copy of the *Long-Lost Friend* he had tucked into a pocket of his oilskin. It was powerful protection against all manner of ills, and would ward him against any evil lurking in the Dewey farmhouse.

Dewey Lane, muddy and rutted once it left the town center, wound up hills and between farms. He circumnavigated many puddles, knowing they could suck his tires down to the axle. But the strong engine of the Oakland Six saw him through. The further he drove down the ancient track, the closer the trees pressed. As he climbed another hill, the road turned into a

rutted wagon trail. Lightning flashed the thrashing branches were brought briefly into sharp focus. Eugene shook his head and resisted the urge to spit. When the locals said you couldn't miss something, they were often lying.

He was looking for a place to turn around, certain he was in the next town, when the woods fell away. A bolt of lightning showed a decrepit, ancient farmhouse. Thunder rolled through the mountains.

He pulled the Oakland into the muddy marsh that served as a chicken yard. He had a sick feeling in his stomach as the as the tires sunk into the sodden ground, but the mud reached only half-way to the hub. As long as the back tires stayed on the road, he should be all right. Before getting out, he looked at the farm. Half a dozen tumbledown structures crouched in the dark.

He squashed his way up to the front door. This close, the aged structure was even more rickety than it appeared from the road. An ancient, weather-beaten saltbox with a catslide roof and a stone chimney.

He pounded the brass doorknocker, felt the rain hammer across him, and wished the builder had the foresight to build a roof over the porch. He knocked a second time, knowing he wasn't likely to receive an answer above the lashing rain.

"Sanct Matheus, Sanct Marcus, Sanct Lucas, Sanct Johannis," he muttered, the old protection against mishaps in a house. And let himself in.

The inside was a rookery. Shards of pottery and bits of broken ironmongery covered many surfaces. Water dripped from the ceiling into iron pots that had long since rusted to the floor. How long had this house been lost, rotting in the forest?

No electricity here. But in the gloom, he saw a kerosene lamp and a box of matches next to it. He lit the lamp, held it high, and was about to call out again when he heard a weak cry from behind a door. There he found an old man lying under a pile of quilts. Two overfull bowls splashed the roof drippings onto the floor.

"Zebediah Dewey?" Eugene asked.

He was gnarled like a stump. A broad, weathered face sported a sharp nose like a granite escarpment. One knotted hand lay on top of the quilts. That hand had seen a lifetime of hard work, and more than its fair share of scars.

“You the doctor?” Dewey rasped.

“Dr. Eugene Rehmer.”

“Rehmer? What kind of name is that? You a damned Quaker?” Dewey gasped the last word out, and Eugene realized how much pain he must be in.

“From Pennsylvania,” Rehmer said, “But I’m no Quaker.”

Dewey hawked and spit. “Trust Gideon to have to import a doctor.”

“I found Gideon myself,” Rehmer said, “I was looking for a new place to live after… after the influenza.” He briefly thought of the bright smiles of his two daughters. They were lost to him now. “Gideon is isolated enough that the ‘flu never got here.”

Dewey looked at him with a jaundiced eye and a sneer.

“You came here of your own free will?” His teeth were a yellow ruin like an ancient graveyard. He stopped sneering to cough, and kept hacking until he was out of breath.

“It’s not a bad town,” Rehmer said as Dewey lay back, panting. The doctor smiled to himself. Two of the factory owners had young wives whose chief complaint was loneliness. He had a prescription for them, best administered behind closed doors and away from the servants. “Sarah Blackington said you were struck by lightning?”

“Interfering busybodies, Killigg and Blackington both,” Dewey said. “There’s nothing for yeh here. I’ll be dead at midnight.”

“And there’s nothing I can do, not even to ease your pain?”

Zebediah grunted.

“You a praying man, Doctor?”

“I pray to our Lord God every day.”

“Do yeh believe there’s other powers in the world? Indian spirits, spells, the power to heal?”

Eugene touched the copy of the *Long-Lost Friend* still in his pocket, thought of his grandmother teaching him Pow-Wow.

“What are you getting at?” he asked.

But the old man was silent, watching the rain course down the small-paned window near his bed. What wasn’t he saying? Lightning flashed, creating sudden light then blinding darkness in the room. The crash of thunder shook the rickety house.

Eugene found a chair, carefully shifted the inches-deep stack of aged newspapers, and sat. The rain rattled at the window, like rats trying to get

in.

“Aren’t you leaving?” Dewey snapped. And Dr. Rehmer wasn’t quite sure. Something prickled the hairs on the back of his neck. There was a power here. Something he had never felt before.

“If I can’t do anything for you, I should at least sit vigil. No one should die alone.”

Zebediah made a hawking sound in his throat. He struggled to raise his hand, but he couldn’t quite get it off the layers of quilts.

“I reckon I won’t be sorry for the company. Yer a good man, even if yeh are a doctor.”

Eugene checked his watch. Less than half an hour to midnight, when Zebediah was certain he was going to die. Why midnight? It sounded like an arrangement. He wondered what sort of entity the old man had made a deal with. Or believed he had. He sat, quiet, waiting for Zebediah to continue the conversation. Rain made tears streaking down the windows.

“I’m a hundred and sixty-five years old,” Dewey said.

Eugene reached out and felt the man’s forehead. No fever...

“Don’t condescend to me, yeh jackanape,” Dewey snorted, “I’m perfectly within my wits.” He wrestled a trembling hand free. Eugene inhaled sharply when he saw the great red fissure that ran down back of his hand. Struck by lightning, he remembered. Zebediah had been struck by lightning.

The old man struggled to pull down the layers of covering, until Eugene saw a puckered crater in Dewey’s chest, wider than his thumb.

“I took a ball from a Redcoat at Hubbarton,” Dewey said.

Eugene bent down, examined Zebediah’s chest. The scar was ancient. It could well have been a musket ball. Although that certainly didn’t prove his ridiculous claim. In Pennsylvania, he’d sometimes come across old Virginians still using their grand-daddy’s musket. He expected Vermonters were much the same.

“Crawled off the battlefield, stumbled into the woods. Knew I was dyin’. But I knowed some Sokoki Indians back then. They told me about Old Slipperyskin.”

“About what?” Eugene suspected it was some local devil or hoodoo.

“Slipperyskin, Old Slipperyskin, he know about your sin,” Dewey’s voice was a weak singsong. “Or so the Indians used to say. But they also told me you could make deals with him. Which is why you’re no good to

me.” He looked at Eugene with a resentful eye. “I ain’t gonna die until he comes for me, at midnight.” His laugh trailed off into an agonized cough. “Wished for a long life, not to die until I called him. And he was good as his word. But I’m in agony. I lived long enough. I’m ready to go see my Maker.”

“And Slipperyskin will come for you at midnight.”

“I said the Sokoki spells, bound him, forced him to accept the bargain.” Dewey wasn’t talking to Eugene any more, just spilling out his story. “He made me eat some of his heart. Tougher than any bear or pig’s heart, stringy and bitter like hate. Almost gagged, but I got it down.” Fear allowed him to focus on Eugene’s face. “Now he’s coming to eat mine.”

“The spells,” Eugene asked. “Do you remember the spells?” What could he ask of this hoodoo, provided it wasn’t the Devil in disguise? He thought of all the things he could want; long life, the death of Donald Saltonstall so Eugene could render his widow her comfort. The return of his—no. He didn’t want his old life back.

“I felt it burning in me, even as I swallowed,” Dewey said, “Felt myself change. My wound closed up, the healing almost more painful than the ball.” His laugh was weak, bitter. “I’d give anything for that pain right now. I wish for my dear Clarise. When she left this world, I didn’t have the nerve to remarry. No woman ever looked at me again. Couldn’t do much, just kept going. Too frightened to end it all, though. Just kept on going, with the farm. Watching the seasons turn, seeing them factories get built. Watching Gideon change forever. Still, always too frightened to call on him, though.”

What did he need? To protect himself. He let the old man ramble. He knew some of the spells in the *Long-Lost Friend* by heart. Best start with a protective charm.

“Christ's cross and Christ's crown, Christ Jesus’ colored blood, be thou every hour good. God, the Father, is before me; God the Son, is beside me; God, the Holy Ghost, is behind me. Whoever now is stronger than these three persons, may come by day or night, to attack me.” And he crossed himself three times.

But would it work? Hoodoos from New England might be different from the hoodoos from Pennsylvania. He looked at his watch. Fifteen minutes to midnight. The Lord’s work was everywhere, wasn’t it? Pow-Wow doctoring should be the same, just like medical doctoring.

He pulled a small square of paper that he sometimes fed to cows to keep them fortified against malign spirits. He looked at the magical square:

S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S

Then crumpled it and popped it in his mouth. The paper was tough. He was no cow. But better to swallow a second protection than rely on a single spell. He wished he had his copy of the *Seventh Book of Moses* to hand. The complex seals were impossible to remember, but they were unbreakable wards that could compel the most powerful spirits.

What else could he do?

He jumped as three mighty knocks nearly tore the door from its hinges. It wasn't Sarah Blackington, he was sure of that. No mortal man could knock that hard. Was he ready? Would the two charms be enough? A powerful hoodoo could peel spells back, one by one.

As he waited, whatever was on the other side of the door pounded three more times. The house shook, little streams of dust and splashes of water falling from the roof. He shouldn't leave it out in the rain. What if it got angry?

With a shaking hand, he reached for the latch.

The monstrous form of a gigantic bear standing on its hind legs filled the frame. It was hunched over so its face was the same height as Eugene's. It was bigger than any bear he'd seen, maybe the size of a Grizzly. He looked up slowly, taking in the wet, matted fur, the blazing red eyes. Its breathing was loud, like the bellows of a forge.

Eugene stumbled backwards, fell amid a clatter of shattering mason jars.

The bear shoved itself through the narrow doorway. Once inside, it stumped across the room, rattling the house with every step. It smelled rank, of wet dog and days-dead possum, but with an undercurrent of peaceful moss and freshly-turned earth.

The awful jaws opened, full of rotting, but terrifyingly huge teeth. Its breath stank of carrion. Eugene flinched away. Those jaws came forward, then stopped just short of engulfing his face. The look in its eyes changed,

and it withdrew. Old Slipperyskin stood on its hind legs again, staring down at the doctor.

“I see thou art a man learnéd on conjuration,” it said. “Thou hast protection the like of which I have not seen afore.” The great eyes blinked. “Thou stand between me and mine debtor.”

“Perform no devilry while you are in this home,” Eugene’s voice sounded thin and weak compared to the bear’s powerful bass. Slipperyskin fixed those terrible, fiery eyes on him.

“I am here only to collect what I am owed. We made the covenant, and I am bound to fulfill it. Zebediah called me, and I respect his wishes. Do not attempt to come between of us.”

“I’m not...” Eugene swallowed. “I won’t stop you.” He looked up at the enormous bear, the massive limbs, the claws as long as fingers. “I… I want to make a bargain… when you are done with Mr. Dewey.”

Those frightening eyes blazed up, seeing through Eugene’s body straight into his soul. No wonder the Indians said that Slipperyskin knew your sin. From somewhere in that massive bear’s chest came a deep rumble, like thunder in faraway mountains.

Slipperyskin turned, squeezing its bulk into Dewey’s tiny bedroom. Eugene stared after, wondering if he should follow. But the gigantic creature slammed the door hard enough to shake the house.

Reeling from the terrible pressure of the hoodoo’s attention, Eugene staggered to a creaky chair with a sagging wicker seat. He put his head in his hands. He had a choice now. Should he go through with it? If he did, what bargain to make?

Faintly, through the door, he heard a surprised gasp, then a thin cry of pain that went on longer that he thought Zebediah was capable of. After it faded, there was only the sound of the rain, on the roof and dripping into pans all around him. How long would it take? He stared at the door, waiting for another sound. And then, softly at first, but growing louder by the second, sloppy sounds like a dog worrying the marrow out of a bone.

His hands shaking, Eugene checked his pocket-watch. Just past midnight. Did he truly want to negotiate with this creature? All he had was an unsubstantiated story by a dying man. And yet, he’d heard the bear speak. How could he deny its power? He was considering making a deal with something that was, right then, devouring Zebediah Dewey’s heart.

The door banged open and the massive bear pulled itself through the too-small doorway, its muzzle now tinged with red. Eugene didn't know what to say, but the bear lumbered toward him, then stood on its hind legs, stooping to keep from hitting the dark-beamed ceiling.

"Does thou still wish to make a bargain?" it asked.

No. He didn't. He didn't trust this massive bear and its terrifying size and rank smell. But then he thought of what he could ask for.

"Yes." He managed to say it without stammering.

The bear leaned close, so Eugene could see every hair, the red blood that rimed its muzzle, smell the death on Old Slipperyskin's breath.

"What is thy desire?" it asked.

"I want what Zebediah wanted," Eugene blurted out, "I want to live a long life, not to die until I call you to take me away."

Those red eyes blazed again, looking not at Eugene but through him. The muzzle moved forward, nudging into his shoulder, nostrils flaring, taking in his scent. Eugene held his breath.

Old Slipperyskin reared up, huge and terrifying, lips curled in a snarl. It reached out with a paw larger than Eugene's head, and Eugene was certain that his charms had failed, and the bear would tear him to bloody ribbons. Instead, a dagger-like claw only tapped him on the breastbone.

"Thou ran from thine wife and daughters, scared of the influenza. Left them to die. Thy heart I would not deign to taste."

Without another word, Old Slipperyskin turned and stumped its way out into the storm, leaving Eugene alone with the body of Zebediah Dewey.

Please Stay Dead, Aunt Marnie
by F. R. Michaels

This being the last testament of myself, Barton Pace, its purpose to set straight the events of the autumn of Eighteen Aught Eighty, Anno Domini, as best I remembers them, so if I am to be hanged for my actions during that time, at least them what reads this will know the truth of it.

The trouble done began shortly after Aunt Marnie's funeral. I cannot say I thought much of Pastor Ray's service, as he did go on and on about Aunt Marnie's wickedness, even suggesting she be buried face down so she could see where she was going. It did not speak well of his own sense of Godly mercy to call her a witch, though I confess it is hard to think of an alternate explanation for the demonic rituals and black magic and all her blasphemous talk of ancient gods. Pastor Ray refused to entomb her remains in the family plot on the estate, insisting a woman of her unholy unwholesomeness not soil consecrated soil.

As it were, we planted Aunt Marnie underneath the big beech tree – in a safety coffin, of course – not far from where I buried my dog after he had shed his own mortal coil.

All would have been well had Aunt Marnie simply stayed in her grave like any respectable deceased woman ought. But Aunt Marnie had her own strange ways, and there is just no talking to some people.

Now about Aunt Marnie, she were not my proper aunt at all, but instead a young woman of uncertain provenance that my family had taken in as an act of Christian charity. She showed up at our door last winter, cold and starved and obviously "in a family way" as Mama Posey called it, although she did not have no family and were just really pregnant. Nobody round our parish knew where she come from. Foreign, she was, or of some foreign influence – she spoke English right and proper just as I does, but her habits were peculiar.

At my father's insistence, she would accompany us to church services but would neither sing hymns nor partake of the communion bread. Aunt Marnie apparently had her own religion, which involved going up to Stormhead and standing on the rocky cliff with her arms raised, swaying

and chanting odd sing-songs in some weird language out to sea. I could not glean who she was singing to, as there were no boats in the channel due to the treacherous rocky shoreline and unpredictable currents.

I know this because I would follow her and watch from hiding, as she would do such observances with no clothing on. I had an interest in such sights, her being comely of appearance and myself being a young man of normal curiosity. I did my best to be circumspect in my actions and would have succeeded but for my dog would follow and bark at inopportune moments.

Aunt Marnie cottoned onto my spectating ways soon enough, but displayed a surprising calm about the situation. Very different from Marybeth Grabel, whose screams from the swimming hole summoned her papa and four older brothers and led to a rather strenuous chase through the south woods, which ended with my posterior cratered with birdshot.

No, Aunt Marnie simply took my hand and explained that I had observed something secret. She come out here on specified nights to commune with an angel what lived in the waters. She explained that she did not come every night because the angel would only come when certain stars were not in the sky, though how anyone could see stars from underwater is an ability I could not comprehend.

When the angel did come, they would converse in an ancient language that he had taught her. Aunt Marnie told me that not everyone was smart like me, and warned that not everyone would understand, hence the need for discretion. I could come and watch, and maybe she would tell the angel about me, so long as I kept it our secret. It felt thrilling to be entrusted with something so special. Plus, I found myself smitten, enraptured by the feel of her hand in mine, and so complied.

My dog, though, had other ideas. He looked out over Stormhead and raised his hackles up and growled. He’d never done the like before, having always been a friendly and playful mutt. It took me extraordinary effort to call him back to the house. He obeyed after a fashion, but gave Aunt Marnie a wide berth and crept past her with his tail betwixt his legs. Dogs is smarter than people when it come to certain things, and if I’d had any sense at all, I would have paid attention to what he was trying to tell me. But I was besotted by Aunt Marnie and only wanted whatever brought she and me closer. Puppy love, they call it, but it is an improper term, as

puppies love us more than people do, and it is to our shame that we cannot always love them back in proper measure.

I mention that because shortly after, an incident occurred where the neighbor's dogs had gotten onto our property and unleashed havoc amongst our chickens. I did not act, and stood frozen for fear of these beastly mongrels, yet my own pup courageously bolted into the fray to protect our birds. In the ensuing fight, I will state that my dog gave good accounting of himself, but it was four to one and they were bigger and meaner.

Even then, I did not act, either from cowardice or inbuilt unsureness of what to do, and stood by uselessly whilst my beloved dog did contend with those four horrible hounds. It was my father and the servants, alerted by the noise, who finally arrived to end the fight. By the time they separated them, my poor dog was bit to pieces. Although no expense was spared to save him, he succumbed the following day. I was inconsolable, for I, to my shame, had done naught to save him.

It was Aunt Marnie who comforted me in my time of grieving, stayed at my side when I dug his grave, and sat vigil with me at the site, and even kissed away my tears. Alone now, I looked to her for companionship. I loved her, and that is made what came after so hurtful and terrifying.

The first indication that something might not be completely right with Aunt Marnie was when her pregnancy come to term. She would not speak of who the father might be, and when her time came, I stood outside the door of the birthing room listening to the panting and grunts and screams, and then the midwife burst out of the door shrieking with her hands bloody up to the elbows. She ran straight through the house and out the servant's door and likely did not stop running till she was well past the property line. As for what Aunt Marnie give birth to, it did not live out the night and was buried discreetly the next morning in an unmarked hole by one of the groundskeepers. I was not permitted a look at the child, and no one would talk about it.

Aunt Marnie nearly died herself, and in thinking back, things may have raveled out better if she had. But she was young and had gotten healthy on wholesome country living and recovered in short time. When she was well enough to take visitors, I sat by her side for as long as everyone would let me. Aunt Marnie was heartbroke at the loss of her

child, and, for some reason, terrified that she had failed to birth a healthy baby.

“I was chosen,” she murmured to me one night in a fit of grief. “My charge was to bear my master’s flesh, to bring him into this world. I failed him.”

I did not understand the content of her speech, and asked, “Who?”

Aunt Marnie would say no more on the subject, and I stifled my curiosity and concentrated on being beside her.

Several weeks had passed before she were fit to resume her nightly rituals. But she did go back out to Stormhead and did her sing-songs out to the ocean, and I went back to peeping at her doing it. Afterward she would take her time dressing, and we would walk back hand-in-hand until we got within site of the house, and separate so the servants wouldn’t gossip.

They did anyway. The gardener’s daughter in particular had a lot to say about Aunt Marnie and me. Unhealthy speculation, Aunt Marnie said, and promised to talk with her. I don’t know what they talked about, but after the poor girl would not sleep at night and shrieked in terror at the sight of my Aunt Marnie. In the end, we had to hire a new gardener.

That weren’t the only odd happening around the parish. To give an instance, the dispute had escalated with our neighbors along the east border of the estate, the ones whose vicious hounds had raided our chicken coops and had done for my poor dog. The mongrels had gotten into our henhouse again and killed six of our chickens and our prized rooster. Pa confronted our neighbor, a chiseling old bastard by name Henrick, and demanded compensation. This lead to unkind words and shouted threats back and forth. I was ready to take a shovel to the dogs myself, and to old man Henrick if he objected, but when the bastard confronted me, I shied back like a wilting daisy. Aunt Marnie stepped in front of me, and I hid behind her, to my shame, and she stared Henrick down with a look that would make even the most brazen of men pause.

That night she brung me with her to Stormhead and asked that I bring one of the newborn goats from the stable. I complied, bringing a black-and-white kid I’d named Little Wilhelm. She took the goat, cut the crying animal’s throat with a small knife, and tossed the squalling creature off the cliff and into the sea. I felt as though I’d been shot in the chest.

“Aunt Marnie!” I protested, in tears, “Why did you do that to Little Wilhelm?”

“Nothing is for nothing, dear Barton,” she explained, “Even gods need to be fed.”

“You said it was an angel out there!”

“I only said that to help you understand,” she replied. “But he is more than angel. He is a god, a very old god, and he will give us everything we want, even justice for your poor dog, and prosperity for your family, but he needs to be appeased.”

She then doffed her clothes and did one of her sing-songs out to sea. Then she turned to me and opened my shirt, and painted an odd star-shaped symbol with her bloody hands on my chest.

“Be sure you want this,” she warned me earnestly.

In a surge of panic, I thought I had witnessed something evil, had been a participant in some type of devil worship. Aunt Marnie gently stroked my face and embraced me, pressing her naked flesh to my body, her skin against my bare chest, and all my objections evaporated like spilt tea on a hot stove.

Next morning, Pa was puzzling over the missing goat when a ruckus from the chickens distracted him. We found the neighbor’s dogs in our coops again but the chickens were unmolested, ‘twas the dogs what we found in all sort of a mess, like something reached inside them and twisted up their bones and innards.

They were still alive somehow, suffering horribly, and my Pa and old man Henrick felt obliged to put aside their differences long enough to apply some shotgun mercy to the poor creatures. I caught Aunt Marnie’s eye and a look passed between us and a shiver went through my whole body.

I had wanted justice, retribution for my poor dog, but what had happened was cruel and past the pale, and I regretted what part I may have unknowingly played in it.

That wasn’t the last time, neither. It appears my compliance had predicated a number of events that I hesitate to recall, and no sensible man would believe. For instance, Widow Tolliver had gossiped a great deal around the community, spreading unkind rumors regarding my parentage, and she were found dead in her bed with her tongue and lower jaw torn off.

And a time after that when Mayor Obersted tried to cheat Pa out of some water rights so he could increase his own cattle herd, and his prized bull were found dead in his stables, crushed as if something had wrapped

around the beast and squeezed two thousand pounds of bad-tempered muscle and horns to pulp.

No one made any connection betwixt the macabre tragedies that had been occurring round the parish and the oddments of my Aunt Marnie's behavior. My head and heart rattled in a panic that I had released some great evil. I figured that when she was sing-songing out to the ocean she *mought* have been calling in favors from that ancient god under the water, paid for with goat's blood on deposit, and I was now part of that axis. I wanted out.

I hesitated in sharing my decision with Aunt Marnie, and now I regret that hesitation. Because the night I built up my courage to tell her, that was the night she went out and did not return. My intent had been to follow her, but I had been held back, as I was busy being upbraided by my Pa regarding some small matters of my personal conduct: to wit, his opinion that I was unmanly, and a coward, an idler and ne'er-do-well who could not locate his own posterior with both hands and set of Indian trail-markers.

My words, as his were coarser, delivered with a directness brought on by a combination of whiskey and frustration, and not fit for the written page. By the time I was able to sneak out to Stormhead, Aunt Marnie was not there. I just thought I had missed her, but it turns out she never made it back to the house that night and it wasn't until the following day that anyone, other than me, missed her.

We set up a search, and a handful of the townsfolk stepped up to help, though most of them found her off-putting. She went missing on a Monday and weren't found until Friday evening, washed up on the rocks off Stormhead. Drownt, no mistake. She must have slipped and fallen from the cliff and the treacherous waters claimed her and spit her back out again, minus her life. If you ask me, whatever she'd been singing to in the nude those nights had called in its favors and used her right poorly.

During her time with us, we never learnt who her people were, or even her last name, so we took it upon ourselves to make the funerary arrangements. I had gotten closer to her than anyone and grieved mightily. I have stated plainly my dissatisfaction at Pastor Ray's less-than-enthusiastic eulogy, but it were not me who chased him into the old church graveyard. And although I am a young man of sturdy limbs and hardy

constitution, I do not possess the strength required to pull the arms and legs off a full-grown Protestant Minister.

Speaking again about the funeral, I had already mentioned that all burials of Pace deceased are done with new-fangled safety coffins. This requirement was due to an embarrassing episode regarding the interment of my uncle Tremaine. Uncle Tremaine, you see, had showed up at dinner in his going-away suit the night after his own funeral, trailing grave dirt and understandably foul of temper over being buried whilst in the condition of being not dead yet. Since that event – and the predictable unpleasantness that followed – many in our parish adopted the new safety coffins, which come equipped with a small bell-tower that does protrude out from the newly deceased's grave. A string in the corpse's hands is connected to a bell at the top of the tower by means of a pipe. Should the dearly departed have not yet actually departed, they yank the string and make with the yelling, alerting passersby to fetch the groundskeeper and tell him to bring his shovel. Meanwhile, the pipe serves as a conduit for air and water and food, though I imagine hot soup might not be recommended.

In keeping with tradition, we buried Aunt Marnie that rainy July morning in a safety coffin, bell-rope in her hands and all. I grieved, as young men grieve at love denied, as the pure of heart grieve when lured by desire to unnatural acts of evil. I suppose I should have been glad when I heard that little bell ringing from the coffin belfry. And would have been, if Aunt Marnie hadn't waited until October to start ringing it.

I remember that night; a crisp, clear Autumn evening after the damp heat of summer had flown and the cool of fall first swept in. I had my windows open wide to enjoy the dry, scented air. It was then I heard the tinkling of the bell. At first I thought I was dreaming, but the sound did persist. It stopped, only to begin again more urgently. I missed my Aunt Marnie, and wanted her back with all my soul, but I can read a calendar and the passage of time does not lie. I withstood the sound as long as I could, then sneaked out the window and made my way, barefoot and in my night clothes, down to the beech tree.

There I found in the moonlight the gravesite, speckled with the earliest fallen leaves, the coffin's small belfry sticking out of the soil, silent. I attributed the ringing to a rambunctious squirrel and went back to bed.

The second night, I heard her voice on the air, calling my name. I pulled the pillows over my head and willed the sound to go away. I sobbed until I fell asleep.

The third night, I dreamt of her.

In my dream, Aunt Marnie came to me through my open window, alive and transformed as we are taught in Sunday School how the dead will resurrect come Judgment Day. She embraced me and I wept that she had come back. Being resurrected evidently gives one a somewhat wanton disposition when it comes to the pleasures of the flesh – at least it did Aunt Marnie – and so we consummated our love in Biblical fashion. I awoke to wetness in my bed, as well as filth and a horrible dead-animal smell. I must have tracked the dirt in somehow from visiting the gravesite that first night, although I do not recall having noticed this previously.

The dream – and the condition of my sheets – disturbed me greatly, and I needed to speak of it and glean advice. I could not confide in friends, of which I had none, nor family, of which I had too much. So I walked off the property on pretense of an errand during a time I knew no one would accompany me, and made my way up to the old First Church to speak to Pastor Ray. After first gaining his promise of confidentiality through strenuous negotiation, I explained all. The content of our conversation will remain private and unrecorded out of respect for the man's memory, although I will state that I found his response and the subsequent shouted accusations leveled at me decidedly un-Christian. This led to a bit of a row, I do so admit, and did I leave in anger, but the Pastor were alive and with all his limbs still attached.

I made my way back home, seething. The sun had set by the time I had walked back, and I thought I caught a glimpse of a figure in a white dress walking in the distance; a white dress very much like the one we buried Aunt Marnie in. I explained away the sighting as the delusions of an agitated boy's mind but found myself doubting my own explanation.

I had purposely avoided the gravesites the day after I heard the bell, which pained me, as I had become accustomed to visiting my dog's resting place daily, but could not do so without also passing by Aunt Marnie's.

That night, as I prepared for bed, I thought I saw Aunt Marnie looking in through my window. I pinched myself to see if I were dreaming again, but I was awake, and kept pinching myself until I found a welt on my forearm. I blinked and started to cry. When I wiped my eyes, the face had

gone. I ran up to the casement and swung out the windows. I thought I heard footsteps running from the house, but that could have been the wind sending the fallen leaves skittering. I closed my eyes and could see her staring in on me, real as flesh and bone. I had to know.

I ran out the servant's entrance and grabbed the big shovel from the gardener's tool shed and walked out to the gravesite. My intent was to dig up the coffin and assure myself that Aunt Marnie still reposed therein, and then put everything back the way it was before anyone noticed.

I slung the tool over my shoulder and marched to the beech tree I had been avoiding for the past few days. When I came round it and saw Aunt Marnie's grave, I stopped and pushed the blade of the shovel into the ground so I could steady myself on the handle.

The dirt from Aunt Marnie's grave lay flung about in great disarray, leaving a crater with the empty, broken coffin at the bottom. As first I figured grave robbers, looking for jewelry or anything else valuable, or even the cadaver they could sell at a medical school. Then I realized the gravesite did not sit anywheres in proximity of the family plot on the estate, and few knew about this place except for the gardener and whoever he may have told in conversation. Seemed a long way to come for a cadaver what was hardly fresh.

Something else was wrong, also. I had difficulty telling in the moonlight, but it looked as though the wooden casket had been broken open from the inside, with great force.

I pondered this when I heard the soft footsteps behind me. I knew whose they were before she spoke.

"Barton," Aunt Marnie whispered.

I turned and there she stood, swaying in the moonlight, in her white going-away dress.

"Barton, why didn't you come when I rang the bell? Why didn't you come when I called for you?"

I remember thinking this had to be a dream, that I had to wake up, or that I must have been delusional and had already dug up the dead woman whilst my mind was in a fevered state. But she stood there, flesh and blood and a charnel smell I recognized from my bed.

"Why won't you speak, Barton? Do you not love me?"

It took a monstrous act of will to find my voice and use it. "I loved my Aunt Marnie. She died. She's gone."

“I am here, Barton.”

“And that is the issue right there. You are not supposed to be up and walking about, not before Judgment Day. This is downright improper, Aunt Marnie. Get back in your grave and I’ll cover you up and we’ll talk no more about it.”

“But it is so cold down there, Barton. Can I not stay with you, where it’s warm?”

“No. You died. Now go back to being dead. We will meet again in the hereafter.”

“That is such a long time away. And I am not dead. I am here. I have come for you.”

“I – I dreamt about you. I spoke to Pastor Ray...”

At the sound of the name her face changed to something angry and devilish, just for a heartbeat. “That name belongs to a wicked, wicked man. He will not keep us apart. I have made sure.”

“You spoke to Pastor Ray? He saw you?”

“I did. He did. He believed the resurrection with his lips, but not his heart. A weak and vain man, was he.”

I realized after she spoke of Pastor Ray in past tense, but I did not make the connection that he was dead until Sheriff Doughty accused me of his murder and dismemberment.

“I do not want to speak of false men who worship false gods,” Aunt Marnie whispered, “I have come back, through the power of my own god, a god older than the one in your book of lies.”

“I will thank you not to blaspheme in front of my dog’s grave, Aunt Marnie,” I rebuked her.

She ignored it. “I failed to give him flesh, so he has taken mine.”

An unnatural light reflected in her eyes, once a warm honey brown, now black with a malevolence behind them I could not name.

“He lives, Barton. He lives in me and gives me life. I have come back. I have come back for you, Barton, my love.”

Curiosity got the better of my fear and disgust. Old feelings welled up in my chest. Even through my tears, I knew that if I gave in, I’d be lost, body and soul. I had to be sure.

“Where did you come back from?” I asked.

“From beyond,” she said.

“Beyond what?” I asked, having never been further than Codger’s Ferry.

“Beyond life and death. Beyond the very edge of existence.”

“Well, Hell, that don’t even make sense...”

“Such wonders have I to show you,” she said. “Such love have I to give you. I have seen the infinite and know its truths.”

“Aunt Marnie, if you really have come back, and know these things, can I ask a question?”

“Of course, Barton, my love. Anything.”

“Aunt Marnie, is my dog Patches, in Heaven?”

She answered, “Patches? Oh, yes, my dear Barton, Patches is in heaven. He waits for you there. Shall I take you to him?”

“Not at this time,” I replied. I hefted the shovel. “I appreciate that answer and I know in my heart that my dog does wait for me in Paradise. I also know that whatever you are, you are *not* my Aunt Marnie.”

And that was the point whereupon I started whomping on her with the shovel. Now, you figure four or five good whacks with a spade and any decent woman would give up her ghost already, but whatever wore Aunt Marnie’s skin had a different idea. Powerful, shapeless limbs reached out from my Aunt’s writhing body toward me, with the intent of pulling me apart like they had Pastor Ray, but my terror gave way to anger. I was a young man with a righteous rage in my heart and a heavy shovel in my hands. I beat back the gelatinous tentacles with great fervor. I had failed to act before and others had suffered, and I was not about to repeat my mistake now.

The thing did put up one hell of a fight – just as I would smash one of the slimy arms. another would ooze out. Persistent cuss, this thing was, it squirmed and shrieked under the blows of my shovel and made with an unholy fuss an improper long time. Perforce I had to pound the God-cursed thing into chowder before all the lumps stopped moving.

Now one cannot smite an unearthly hell creature with a heavy garden implement without kicking up some form of ruckus, and the noise did rouse the servants. The maid come down and saw me holding the shovel, all a-splattered with Aunt Marnie’s imposter’s vital juices, parts of its flesh still wriggling in its death throes. Rosalinda is a good maid, but at this point she loses her prim and proper demeanor and gets downright

unreasonable, what with the screaming and hollering and calling me a murderer and all.

I tried to explain myself, but the constabulary were brought into it, and with them come the lawyers, and Judge Wallingford, and soon enough Ned Farrell the hangman will do his part. The argument of the prosecution was that Aunt Marnie were buried alive, and had dug her way out shortly after, not unlike my Uncle Tremaine, and gone away for a spell; upon her return I had murdered her in a jealous rage ignited by unrequited love.

The counsel for my defense could offer no proof that her grave had been intact the entire span of her absence, nor make a convincing argument that the battered carcass in the white dress was of no human form. In the end, no one would listen nor lend credence to my description of events, hence this document I have penned on my last day prior to execution. I do not deny having killed the what-ever-it-was that had the appearance of my Aunt Marnie, and if I have one consolation in this miscarriage of justice, it is that me and my shovel stopped that thing before it could do any further mischief.

And that is my story. I do not bear false witness, but do not expect to be believed. For myself I have just one request: after they hang me, bury me under the beech tree next to my dog Breadcrumb. A plain wooden box will do.

The Perfect Parent
by Peter N. Dudar

“Thanks for meeting me on short notice, Tom.”

Archie Ballard set his briefcase next to the empty chair and sat down across from the young author. Tom Dorsey looked every bit the writer-type; faded denims and green flannel shirt (unbuttoned to expose the Edgar Allan Poe tee shirt underneath), and dark horn-rimmed glasses. His hair was unkempt and he had at least three- or four-days’ stubble on his cheeks and chin. The pencil tucked precariously behind his right ear completed the picture of a young, ambitious author. Ballard suspected in ten years ambition would be replaced by quiet resignation, a potbelly, and a drinking problem, but for now the kid looked content. Tom smiled politely and glanced over the top of his glasses at his half-eaten hamburger and fries.

“Sorry I didn’t wait for you, but I got a royalty check this morning and I was starving.” Tom picked up his rum and Coke and took a sip.

“Oh, that’s fine,” Ballard said. He looked around Fogg’s Tavern at some of the other patrons. More folks were drinking on a weekday afternoon than he cared to see, but that was how things were nowadays. Besides, he was on official business and preferred to wait until after hours for his tumbler of brandy. His drink would be waiting for him later at home—if this meeting didn’t go too long, that was—but Ballard suspected it would. The information he was about to relate was so shocking, it was going to rock the young writer’s world.

“It’s been six months now, but I’m sure you’re still grieving over Neil’s death,” Ballard said. “You and Neil Cooper were close friends for quite a few years. How are you taking it?”

Tom sighed, picked up his cocktail, and drank it down. When he saw the waitress approaching, he held the empty glass up and nodded to indicate a refill.

“Can I get anything for you, sir?” she asked the lawyer sitting across from him. Ballard smiled politely and said, “Just a cup of coffee, please.”

The waitress sauntered back to the counter. Ballard reached down, opened his briefcase, and plucked out a large yellow document envelope. He dropped the envelope unceremoniously on the table next to Tom's half-eaten lunch, leaned back, and folded his arms.

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm very sorry for your loss. Neil was a hell of a writer. I've read at least three or four of his books, and I have to tell you…some of his stories scare the shit out of me."

Tom smiled, and Ballard could see the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. They made his gray irises glisten in the cheap overhead fluorescent bulbs. The author tried to speak, but instead removed his glasses, set them on the table, and then placed his palm over his face to conceal the growing storm inside him. Ballard had gotten the impression when he spoke to the young man on the phone that this meeting was going to go very hard for him, and with the prudence he'd obtained over twenty-six years of working cases for Johnson and Wilkes, he congratulated himself over deciding to *not* officiate things over the telephone.

"Yeah, Neil was really something. I still can't believe he's gone." Tom picked up his napkin and dried his eyes. "I'm not even sure what happened. There are all kinds of rumors going around in our author's circle that he committed suicide. But I just can't believe that. I know he missed Christine a lot, but…"

He didn't have to finish the sentence. Ballard already knew about Neil and Christine's four-year-old boy, who was now orphaned and living with his grandmother in Connecticut. And he was right; Neil would *never* have taken his own life and abandoned his son Sean. It would have fractured Christine's soul had he done such a selfish thing.

The waitress returned with their drinks and Tom immediately downed half of his third cocktail before Ballard could empty his creamer into his mug and stir.

"You'd better go easy on that," Ballard said coldly, "You need to be sober if you're to sign for what's inside the envelope."

Tom set his glass down, ran his hand haphazardly through his curly hair, and put his glasses back on so they perched halfway up his nose.

"What'd you bring me?" he asked. "Is that Neil's last will and testament?"

"Sort of."

Ballard was used to this kind of tête-à-tête. By this point in the grieving process, most loved ones were in the “greedy heir” phase, just waiting to find out what was bequeathed to them by the deceased. Family inevitably become vultures, wondering if treasures awaited or if they were about to be snubbed and cheated. Tom Dorsey wasn’t family, but it was obvious that he was closer to Neil Cooper than his deadbeat brother in New Hampshire; or his catty, self-aggrandizing sister in New York (who’d phoned the day after Neil’s passing to press him about the will). Tom not only acted as if he didn’t feel entitled, but almost as if he was put off by the meeting. In fact, Ballard half-expected Tom to sign off on Neil’s request and pass the buck back onto Mildred Cooper.

“Neil has named you in his will to be the custodian and executor of all his written works, both published and unpublished. Do you understand what that means?”

Tom glanced suspiciously at the yellow envelope.

“It means that Neil just quadrupled my workload. I have my own affairs to contend with. I have deadlines. My agent is hounding me every other Thursday for updates on my new novel. I have my publisher threatening to terminate our contract if I don’t deliver a blockbuster manuscript…my last book was a bit of a flop, if you didn’t know. I’m really flattered that he thought of me, that he trusted me enough to take this on, but if I do—and here’s the thing that makes me worry—If my new book *is* a success, people will think I just stole his work and put *my* name on it. And I’m not okay with that. So if it’s all the same, maybe you should designate this stuff to his agent, or to his mother. There are people out there who can help her sort it all out.”

Ballard’s face was stony, unchanging. He’d researched Tom Dorsey with great scrutiny before arranging the meeting, and Tom seemed like a reputable fellow. It was neither Ballard’s job nor his place to make a value judgment as to how Neil’s will was executed. It was merely business. It was Tom’s frankness and apprehension that made him certain he was the right man for the job. After all, there were complications involved.

“I can’t tell you what to do on this,” Ballard said. “But I can tell you *this* much. If you really want to know how Neil Cooper died, you’re going to have to sign your name on my documents here. And that includes a waiver forbidding you to disclose *any* personal information concerning Neil’s death or his estate. But it’s all in there. He started a journal just

after Christine died. Neil's mother insisted on the non-disclosure. She doesn't want anything damaging about her son to be presented to the general public. And I have to say, knowing what I know, that I don't blame her a bit."

Tom sat back and rubbed the whiskers on his chin. He continued to eye the yellow envelope suspiciously, almost as if he'd expected it to jump up and bite him. Ballard hated himself for having to dangle that big of a carrot to get him to consider accepting the inheritance, but he truly believed it was for the best.

"So you already know how he died," Tom said, never taking his eyes off the envelope. "Why is it such a big secret? Shouldn't his friends have a right to know?"

Ballard scooped up the envelope (causing Tom to jump backward in his seat), flipped it over, and pried the metal tabs so that the flap could open. He withdrew the stack of papers and neatly set them before the young author, slipped a pen out from the inside pocket of his suit coat, and pushed it into Tom's trembling hand.

"I have to follow the law on this, Tom. You've got questions. The answers are all here. And I can promise you this much; you're *not* going to like what you find out. I've already read through it all and I know what happened. As soon as you put your John Hancock on all this paperwork, you and I can start talking all about it."

Tom glanced over his horn-rimmed glasses at the pen in his hand. The trembling was beginning to subside. There wasn't a cat alive that curiosity couldn't lure in and devour. The young writer leaned over and scribbled his name and initials through the stack of papers.

* * *

"I'll start at the beginning," Ballard said, casually glancing down at his watch. He'd already known this meeting was going to run lengthy, had already planned on billing Mildred Cooper for at least two hours of legal services (he'd also known enough to order lunch anyway, and planned to cover both his and the writer's meals and write them off as a business expense). "Neil had a bit of a nervous breakdown after Christine died. After the funeral, he drove himself and his son out to his mom's place in Connecticut. He started to feel overwhelmed with the strain of having to

raise Sean by himself—something that he probably never considered when he and Christine became parents."

Tom nodded, trying to imagine his friend of a solid dozen years suddenly having to wake up every morning and get his boy dressed, fix him breakfast, and keep him occupied all day, rather than rolling out of bed and heading straight for the computer to get his customary four hours of writing done. Christine's death meant that sacrifices had to be made. Tom knew that Neil loved his son more than life itself, and that meant his priorities would have changed drastically, especially during the time when he and Sean needed to be grieving together.

"Neil thought that living with his mother would help alleviate some of the new responsibilities he had to take on, and for a while, it did. He got back to work writing his final novel, as well as starting the journal I told you about. He also started drinking heavily, and his mother eventually told him he needed to sober up or get out. I don't know if you've ever met Mildred Cooper, but she's a tough-love kind of gal. Especially since she felt she was too old to be raising Tom's child by herself. Between you and me, I feel horrible that the kid is stuck there now, with Mildred having to raise him."

Between you and I, Tom mentally corrected the lawyer.

"So they moved back home, and Neil found himself wallowing in the same morass all over again. I think he really, *really* wanted to be the 'perfect parent' for Sean. He didn't want to disappoint Christine, and he certainly didn't want to feel like a failure in raising his only child. But the reality was he felt like he couldn't keep up with all his other obligations anymore. He grew tired of being overwhelmed. He needed to find a way to multitask and get work done while still being able to watch his boy grow up right." Ballard paused for dramatic effect. "So Neil had the surgery."

"The surgery?" Tom had been hanging on every word. He was still throwing suspicious glances at the yellow envelope of documents he'd already signed. Ballard noticed and nonchalantly scooped the envelope up off the table and dropped it back inside his briefcase.

"Yeah. I don't think anybody knew about his surgery, and that's probably a good thing. If he'd come to me and asked *my* advice, I'd have recommended he get a good psychiatrist instead. But by that point I don't think he was coping at all. It was like he had a squirrel loose in the attic of his mind, if you catch my drift."

“Yeah, get on with it,” Tom said. He picked up his cocktail and meant to take a sip, and then paused. “Is it okay to drink again? Now that I’ve signed your goddamn papers?”

“Sure, why not?” Ballard glanced over at the waitress and signaled her over. “I suppose it’s safe for me to have one, too.” He looked up at the waitress. “I’ll take a whiskey on the rocks. In fact, make it a double, please.”

Ballard watched her ass as she sashayed back to the bar.

“Where was I? Oh, yeah…the surgery. He went to one of them—what are they called?—not a plastic surgeon but some kind of weird reconstruction specialist. It’s all in his memoir if you want to look it up and find the name. Anyway, Neil went in and told him he wanted something in particular done. He even offered to pay in cash. I guess it’s pretty unlucky after all that his books were such good sellers. Had he been a nobody, we probably wouldn’t be having this conversation. He told this quack doctor that he wanted eyes put in the back of his head.”

“He *what?* !”

Tom’s own eyes looked comical, like huge saucers sitting behind those horn-rimmed glasses.

“I know. It sounds insane, doesn’t it? But think about it, Mr. Dorsey; have you ever lost the love of your life? Have you ever had to hold the frayed ends together once they’ve been severed? Some days it feels damn near impossible. Neil felt like he was running out of options, and the best way to be able to sit at his computer and get work done *and* still keep an eye on his four-year-old boy was to have a new set of peepers installed.”

“He found a doctor that was willing to do this? That just goes beyond all ethics. People have lost medical licenses for less than that.”

The waitress returned with the whiskey. Ballard took the drink, dropped a twenty dollar bill on her tray, and told her to give them some privacy. He lifted the glass to his lips and took a healthy sip.

“Yes, he found a doctor willing to do the surgery. I don’t honestly understand the logistics of it all, and the fact is that the doctor insisted upon only adding *one* eye rather than a pair. There was nothing on the level about any of it…no organ transplant list or anything like that. As for the business of optical nerve splicing or cutting and removing skull segments and creating an ocular cavity, or developing the muscle tissue that would allow an eyelid to open and shut, or working tear ducts…”

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Tom whispered, “I can’t get over this. How the hell was he going to go out in public without being looked at as some kind of freak? How would he do book signings or reading events?”

“That’s all easy enough to deal with. A hat would suffice.”

“Did it even work? They actually put an eye—a human eye—into the back of his head. Was he at least able to see out of it?”

“Oh yes,” Ballard sighed, picking up his whiskey and gulping it down. “And better than you’d think. According to his journal, for the first few months, everything worked out perfectly. He could sit there at his computer and type away, all the while watching Sean playing on the floor in his den. At first he was really happy about it; felt like the sensation of being overwhelmed was finally drifting away. And then things started going bad. Slowly at first and then eventually becoming disastrous.”

Tom’s cheeks had gone from rosy to pale. He thought of his best friend Coop, his companion at all the conventions and writers’ conferences, shaking hands and signing books for the line of customers that never seemed to give *his* books a second glance. He imagined Coop’s head shaved completely bald and could almost see that rogue eye on the back of his skull. The eye would be open wide, bloodshot and accusing, staring back at him while Neil’s fans mewled and stuttered hyperbole-laden praise. It struck him profoundly to discover just how jealous he really was over his friend’s success.

“Like I said, it’s all in his journal,” the lawyer continued. “One morning Neil was working on his final novel—I think he planned on calling it *Such Pretty Confusion* —and Sean was in the den watching some cartoon or other on PBS, and then all of a sudden Sean was standing up in the middle of the room, staring at him. But not just staring. According to what Neil wrote in his journal, Sean’s face had changed. The boy’s skin had turned green and the pupils of his eyes broke apart like egg yolks, making his sclera look like soured yellow crocodile eyes. He wrote that Sean was smiling the most malicious, unnatural smile he’d ever seen, like his mouth had stretched out halfway around his head and magically filled with snake fangs. Neil wrote that he nearly had a heart attack, and actually popped a vertebra in his neck from craning his head so fast to see his son with his real eyes.”

“What did he see?”

“He saw his son. Exactly like he was supposed to. The boy was standing there looking at him, but he was frowning rather than smiling.”

From Neil Cooper’s Journal:

“Daddy, I’m hungry. Would you please fix me some lunch?”

“Sure thing, bud.”

My heart was still pounding in my chest, and I actually got the chills. I must have written about people getting goose bumps and feeling dread in the pit of their belly a thousand times, but I’d never really experienced it for myself until that moment. It was terrifying…like looking into the eyes of a demon. I’m not exactly sure what I’d have done if he was still in that monstrous form when I looked at him with my real eyes, and I’m glad I didn’t have to find out. When we went into the kitchen I made Sean walk in front of me, just so that I didn’t have to see him through my third eye. It simply scanned around my home from behind me as we moved from room to room, looking for unaccounted-for shadows and any other oddities I might not have noticed before with my real eyes. I had him sit down at the kitchen table, and anytime I had to turn my head to fetch something I had to force that eye to close because I was too afraid to see him in that demonic state again.

“I can’t get over this,” Tom whispered. “Jesus Christ, this sounds like something out of one of our books.”

“It gets worse,” Ballard sighed and drained the last few drops from his tumbler. “The implant went in successfully, and stayed rather healthy for a while. Neil thought it was a neat trick to conceal the eye in such a way that he could still see out of it when he went out in public. He could stand in line at the grocery store and spy on the people around him. He wrote that he could watch other shoppers entering their PIN codes when they used their debit cards, or that he could catch secretive glances down ladies’ shirts as they bent over to empty their shopping carts. He said that at times it made him feel like a comic book villain. Of course, Sean would be right there with him and after that dreadful incident, whatever tricks that third eye allowed him felt cheap and loathsome. He got the transplant so that he could watch his son, but discovered that watching his son through that eye was about the *last* thing he wanted to do. And then the night terrors began.”

“Night terrors?”

The journal continues:

Now that it's daytime and I've been able to process it all, what happened last night made me think of the Edgar Allan Poe story The Telltale Heart*…the one where the young man ends up murdering the older fellow because the old guy has a creepy eye that upsets him so badly. I started taking tranquilizers to help me sleep. Things have grown worse as of late, and I'm constantly in a state of panic. Every now and again I'll be trying to write, or to get stuff done around the house, and I'll see Sean scoot past in that damned third eye. Always green skinned. Always smiling that awful demon grin. My daily life feels like I'm raising a beast rather than a boy. I've taken to wearing a bandana on my head so that the eye remains covered, but even now I can hear Sean creeping around the house…tiptoeing on creaky floorboards and racing conspiratorially up and down the stairs. But what happened last night! Like I said, I took my sedative just before bed, and sometime after midnight I heard a noise in my bedroom. I was sleeping face down in my pillow, so my third eye opened, reflexively, to see what was going on.*

Sean was standing in the doorway.

My son was just standing there staring at me through those awful crocodile eyes. I have no idea how long he'd been there in the room with me, but seeing him there pulled me from deep, sound sleep up to a heightened state of awake and alert. I could feel my heart thudding away in my chest as I wondered if he could see my eye open while the room was still dark. I moved my hand slowly, very slowly, over to the lamp beside my bed and flipped the switch, then turned my head to look at Sean. I screamed out loud when I discovered he wasn't actually in the doorway like my third eye saw, but standing right next to me…

"I think what we both need to understand," Ballard looked up from his second drink and examined the young writer, "is that this new organ was an alien thing. It was not to be trusted because it wasn't actually a part of *him* ."

"You're saying that Neil was delusional and paranoid?"

"Wouldn't you? We have no idea whose eye was implanted into Neil Cooper. It could have been from a drug addict that overdosed and died. It could have been from someone with severe mental illness. The one thing it

could *not* have been was that Sean Cooper is actually a demon, and that he was *trying* to coerce his father into taking his own life."

"Then it *was* suicide."

Ballard sighed. "The official police report claimed that Neil's death was accidental. You already know they found him at the bottom of the stairs. You know that he'd been consuming sedatives and still drinking heavily. Everything reported is as true as one can see. Unless…"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you're looking through an alien eye."

The journal continues:

I believe my son is trying to kill me. I know it sounds crazy, but when you have a third eye to look at the world with, it's hard not to see all those hidden dimensions looming around you. I can look at Sean through my real eyes and see a beautiful little boy, with golden hair that makes him look like a baby chicken when I ruffle it. I can see freckles and the missing tooth that came out when he bit into an apple last week. I can see Christine's features in his nose and cheeks, and I can see how much he hurts for her when I look into his eyes. But when that third eye sees him, all of that goes away. He isn't a child, but a thing. A dreadful thing. I see the way he's taken to sneaking up on me when I'm trying to get stuff done, or how he's taken to carrying weapons around the house with him, like he's some kind of primitive hunter…holding a dinner fork like a spear as he darts through the halls of our home. Every now and then he'll make demands like, "Daddy, I need attention!" or "Daddy, I want you to play with me." I feel compelled to just drop whatever I'm doing and give in, hoping to keep that green monster at bay."

"Aha!" Tom cried out. "Don't you see?"

The lawyer jumped backward, surprised by the young author's outburst.

"See what?"

"Neil is talking in metaphors and clichés. Green monster? Seriously? Neil was implying that Sean was jealous from not getting enough attention. And rightly so, may I add. The kid needed his father to help work through the grief of losing his mother. He needed love and tenderness and reassurance. Neil was a great guy, but he has never been a demonstrative person. He loved Christine dearly, but he was never big on

public displays of affection or any of that stuff. And if you knew him like I did you'd know that his career *always* came first.

"He could live without Christine and probably without Sean, but if you took writing away from him, he'd have taken his own life in a heartbeat. And that's what all of this comes down to. He painted himself into a corner. He couldn't be a writer *and* the 'perfect parent' at the same time. So he created all of this nonsense to justify his self-sabotage."

"If you say so." Ballard picked up the check the waitress left on the table, examined it, and then reached into his wallet to cover the tab.

A confused look spread across Tom's face.

"Let me ask you this—when the police and the EMTs arrived, did they find a third eye in the back of his head? Wouldn't *that* have made the evening news? I'd think *that* one would be pretty newsworthy. 'Bestselling Author Discovered With Third Eye'. Didn't anyone else ever see it?"

"Of course they didn't."

"And why do you think *that* is?"

The journal continues:

That little sonofabitch cut my eye out! I fell asleep last night at the computer, and when I awoke, I felt the gaping hole in the back of my skull where my eye should have been. I've been trying to piece together what happened last night, and all I seem to remember is that I put Sean to bed around 7:30, and then went back to work on Such Pretty Confusion*, trying to get the first draft completed by my deadline. I don't know how much scotch I drank, nor do I recall if I took my sleeping pill or not. All I* do *know is that this gaping hole in my head is hideous. And it hurts so goddamn bad I can't stand it! I can feel air touching the back of my brain, and blood and pus trickling down the cold skin of my scalp. I remember screaming Sean's name over and over again, but the little demon wouldn't come to me, so I stormed the house from room to room. I was furious, and lumbered like a giant—turning over furniture and knocking pictures off the wall—as I went after him. I found him hiding under his bed, cowering in fear and clutching a bloody soup spoon in his trembling hand. But the eye…my goddamn eye was nowhere to be found. Sean refuses to tell me what he did with it. But I'll get it out of him. Sooner or later, I'll get that eye back and then I'll make him pay for what he's done to me…*

“I think Neil really intended on killing his son. I believe that much. The only missing piece is what happened next. I don’t know if Neil fell down the stairs while chasing Sean, or if Sean actually pushed him. Without the eye in the back of his head, Neil never would have seen him coming.”

“If there *was* a third eye,” Tom added. “Which I still don’t believe. Without proof, all of what you just told me is nothing more than fiction. And speaking of which, now that I’ve signed your paperwork, fiction will be about the only thing I get to deal with for a long time.” Tom lifted his glass—his fifth or sixth rum and Coke, he couldn’t remember—and offered a toast.

“To Coop! You were everything a great storyteller should be. I wish I had your talent. Thanks for leaving me the yarn to end *all* yarns. Well played, sir.” He tipped his head back and finished his glass. Ballard watched in silence until the young author put the empty glass down.

“I’ll arrange for all of Neil’s files and documents to be shipped to your house,” the lawyer said. “You can expect them within five business days. But I do need to give you one more thing before I leave you.” Ballard picked up his briefcase, set it on the table, and opened it. He retrieved a small, square wooden box and placed it in front of the author, and then closed his briefcase and turned to walk away.

He could hear the gasp, and the screech of the author pushing his chair backward away from the table.

“What’s in the box?”

The lawyer turned and looked at Tom Dorsey. The potbelly and drinking problem were definitely waiting somewhere in his future, perhaps closer than he’d originally imagined. Tom Dorsey would never be the author that Neil Cooper was, and that was probably for the best.

“Mildred Cooper mailed that to me a few days after Neil’s death. In the note, she said that Sean brought it with him when he came to live with her. She said that it was *not* a part of her son when she gave birth to him, and she didn’t know what else to do with it. I found that I did not have the courage to look inside, even after all this time, but I suspect you will. It’s all the proof you will ever need, Mr. Dorsey.” With that, the lawyer turned and left the bar.

Tom picked up the box and cupped it tight in his hands, and in his mind he could imagine his dead friend passing through vast, obscene

dimensions all around him. It was the most loathsome inheritance he could imagine, and as he left the bar he found himself wondering if he would ever be brave enough to open the box and see the third eye for himself. He thought of Sean Cooper, the four-year-old boy who needed his father so badly, yet was so afraid of what his father had done to himself that he committed mutilation. He thought of how crazy Sean would have had to be to carve the alien eye out of his father's head, never even understanding exactly why it had to be done. In the end, Tom decided it was best not to look. He thought just seeing the alien eye would be enough to drive him crazy as well.

Your Emergency Response Guide
by Jeffrey Thomas

You have received this printed ERG (Emergency Response Guide) because of a particular set of circumstances that make it impossible to broadcast an Emergency Alert via television or radio (refer to articles 4, 12), though individuals not suffering hearing impairment will have taken notice of the Emergency Siren, which no doubt commenced within the past hour. We hope that in the time it has taken emergency courier teams belonging to our postal service to deliver these guides to individual homes, you have remained indoors, though preferably not in your basement. (See article 10.) It is imperative that you read the following 35 articles of instruction to address this event, the nature of which is indicated by the color of the guide. (In this case, yellow.)

(1) The first imperative is that you remain indoors, having locked and preferably barricaded all manner of ingress or egress (doors, windows, etc). If your home has a basement, it is also vital not to enter it, and to lock or barricade its door. (Again, see 10.) Do not attempt to go into the basement, or outside your home, to secure the exterior bulkhead door, if there is one. If you are reading this, it is already too late to safely consider such action.

(2) Now that you have undertaken the most urgent course of action, you may proceed through the following articles. As you do so:

(3) Make as little noise as possible, and if it is nighttime – as it is most likely to be, in this particular set of circumstances – subdue all lighting. As electrical power might fail, it is advised to rely on candles in any case. Use blankets to cover windows so that light cannot be detected from outside your home. If you have flashlights, keep their beams directed away from windows. It is best if you can shelter in a room that has no windows at all. A windowless room will also be the preferred environment in which to attempt creating an exit portal. (See 20.)

(4) Do not turn on your TV or radio, or utilize the internet (home PC, smart phone, etc) in an attempt to learn more about this situation. In this particular set of circumstances, these modes of information transmittal will have been dangerously compromised. (See 12.) When, or if, it is again safe to resume normal behaviors in our reality, you will receive a blue pamphlet with a security hologram printed on it, to ensure it is not a counterfeit, once again delivered by one of our emergency courier teams.

(5) Ideally this guide will have been slipped under your door or pushed through a mail slot. It would now be advisable to secure the gap under your door or seal the mail slot with layers of duct tape. More likely, you answered a knock or the door bell to find a courier outside. We apologize if his/her unusual protective gear proved surprising or alarming. We hope you did not try to question the courier, as detaining them in the swift dissemination of these guides is to be discouraged. Therefore, if you hear them or their vehicles outside, as they continue on their way through your neighborhood, do not attempt to look out a window at them or open a door to seek communication/ask for information. Most importantly, the sounds you hear might not be the couriers at all, but merely an attempt to make you believe it is the couriers.

(6) Once you have received this guide, do not respond to any further knocks or buzzing at your door. Do not reply to any voices you may hear calling to you through doors or windows, even if you are addressed by name, or the voice sounds familiar, or the speaker is seeming to cry out in pain or fear. Again, when – or if – it is ever again safe to resume normal activities in our reality, you will find the blue pamphlet of follow-up instructions left in your mailbox, or in a plastic bag hanging from your doorknob, and you will know it is there because at that point, the Emergency Siren will have ceased.

(7) It is entirely possible, however, that the Emergency Siren will fail or be compromised prior to the end, if it comes, of this event. Use your best discretion should the siren cease. A tentative peek outside a window might be risked at this point, but only by an adult.

(8) After the initial flurry of activity in securing your home, when a sense of stillness comes, it will be normal for a great deal of anxiety to descend upon you and your family, if you have one. If you have a family member

who is frightened and may prove a risk to your security by sobbing loudly or even, in a panic, attempting to flee your home, it is crucial that you set aside your own anxiousness to calm them. Embrace them, reassure them in a soothing voice that you will not abandon them, that this will all end soon, that help will come, even if these things might not prove to be true. It may be difficult for you not to focus on your own terror and disorientation, but try to call up pleasant memories of your life with your family member to reinforce your resolve to comfort them. For instance, if you are married, recall your wedding day! Do you remember when your spouse smeared that piece of cake into your face so badly that you were blowing frosting out of your nose the next day? Do you remember holding them stickily in the dark on that first night of your honeymoon, after you finished making love? That sense of closeness and bonding is what you need now. Similarly, if you have children and they are in a highly distressed state, remember cradling them in your arms on the day of their birth, that first experience of bonding. Remember holding your child's hand as you walked them to the bus on the first day of school. Remember them climbing into bed with you and wanting you to hug them after a terrible dream. Tell them that this, too, is just like a terrible dream that will soon pass, even if that doesn't ultimately transpire. Smile as much as you can. Distract them with games, though not on any electronic device (see 12), or silly jokes and stories, but as always be mindful of the level of sound.

(9) In protecting our immediate loved ones, this approach of selflessness and sacrifice will help ensure the survival of our species. However, you can do nothing for any neighbors or even family members who seek entrance to your home after the commencement of the Emergency Siren and receipt of this guide. In any case, these individuals might not be whom they claim to be, or even appear to be (see 13), though you should not look outside to ascertain this.

(10) Most of the rifts from which the Crossers have emerged will have manifested in subterranean areas: hence the importance of shunning basements, and also subways in urban locations. We do not know why this is the case. Further, we do not know why the Crossers are not likely to attempt ascending to any level of a building beyond its ground floor. It may be in part due to their not entirely corporeal composition, which also

accounts for their inability to physically force their way into a secured building. Whatever the reason, it appears to be safer to shelter on a second floor or in an attic (again, preferably in an upper room lacking windows, in which to attempt opening an exit portal). Therefore, if you are a citizen of an urban area in which you might ascend high in an office tower or multi-leveled apartment complex, your risk of encounters with the Crossers will be lessened, at least insofar as our obviously limited research indicates.

(11) Before you relocate to a higher level of your home or the building in which you found yourself when this event commenced, be sure to bring with you all the food and bottled water you can. Also, candles and flashlights, and something to mark out a portal with: paint or a permanent marker (see 20). You should naturally bring guns if you have them. Though it is questionable whether gunfire would do lasting harm to the Crossers, beyond temporarily disrupting the form they assume in our reality, there is always the threat of attack from other human survivors, and a gun might afford you a regrettably desirable means of escaping a perhaps worse – or at least, vastly less understood – outcome.

(12) How the Crossers are able to utilize electronic devices in which to reach out to us is unknown, but researchers have discovered this is the case, sometimes at the expense of their lives or sanity. Though in the course of this event, a TV screen or computer monitor or smart phone screen might seemingly only display an uncanny yellow glow accompanied by a loud electronic hum, from this yellow glow a Crosser might suddenly flow through, like an octopus squeezing its boneless body through a narrow gap. It is the easiest means for these entities to gain access to the interior of a building that has otherwise been secured against them. It is advised to unplug these devices, lest an unknowing child activate them behind their parents' backs, to remove the batteries from them, to lock them safely away, and so on. (Radios, of course, do not enable the entities to cross over, but no conventional broadcasts will be heard, only that loud electronic hum. Likewise, telephones lacking screens will be harmless, but useless, for the duration of this event, again only producing that characteristic electronic drone.)

(13) The Crossers usually assume a human guise, though it is also possible they might appear in the form of an innocuous animal, such as a dog or

cat. Though generally they appear as anonymous human beings, blandly clothed, in any variety of gender or age or ethnicity, they can also appear as someone the viewer knows and loves, in order to deceive them. How they acquire the knowledge to manifest in this way is unknown. The Crossers have also appeared to researchers as the researchers themselves. It is possible that the Crossers affect this illusion only in one's mind, as it is thus far impossible to make any sort of visual recording of them, though their voices have been recorded several times.

(14) When a Crosser makes direct contact with a human being, in an attack that has the appearance of an embrace – invariably, with the Crosser affecting a wide grin (see 15) – the human being will fall dead on the spot as if their very soul (so to speak) has been stolen from them. Autopsies of researchers who met this fate have revealed no concrete reasons for their demise.

(15) The grinning expression reported on the faces of attacking Crossers is said not to be malicious or sadistic, but to appear almost affectionate. It has been hypothesized that the Crossers mean no harm – indeed, that they *do* no harm, and that perhaps they are somehow sending the "life essence" or persisting consciousness of their victims to another plane. It has therefore been hypothesized that the Crossers are themselves those life essences that have previously been transmitted from our reality to theirs. However, until such speculation can be verified, for our own safety we must interpret the Crossers' actions as hostile and act under the assumption that they bring only a permanent cease to all human life they come in contact with.

(16) If you have reached this article in the ERG you know everything we currently know about the Crossers – aside from three final points we will share at the end of the guide, which again involve an unfortunate degree of speculation but are of extreme importance, in that a strange byproduct of the Crossers' insertion into our reality will enable you to create a *return* portal (see 33) by which to restore yourself to our world once the event has ended – should it end.

(17) We will reiterate several points in order to drive them home. The Crossers will attempt to deceive you. For example, you may hear the voice of a deceased loved one call to you through a window: "Do you remember

when I smeared that piece of cake into your face so badly that you were blowing frosting out of your nose the next day?" You may hear a departed spouse call to you through your door: "Do you remember holding me stickily in the dark on that first night of our honeymoon, after we finished making love?" Or the voice of a dead partner saying with mock fondness: "Do you remember cradling our baby in your arms on the day of their birth? Do you remember holding our child's hand as you walked them to the bus on the first day of school? Do you remember them climbing into bed with us and wanting you to hug them after a terrible dream?" The Crossers will likely try to trick you into believing they are your loved one restored to life, or at least the ghost of said loved one. Until further research can establish it, we must not believe these entities are the spirits of former mortal human beings.

(18) Similarly, because the Crossers have the ability to interfere with our technology, there is the possibility that they may even have compromised individual copies of the ERG in the process of its printing. As we do not have the time or human resources to inspect each and every copy of this guide, please be alert as to suspicious anomalies and messages in the text that might try to mislead you in a dangerous manner.

(19) At this point in the event, we trust you are in an upper level of the home or building you are sheltering inside, and if there is one, in a room without windows, and with a supply of food, water, etc. immediately at your side. Now, again, you will no doubt be experiencing a sense of relative stillness accompanying a lull in activity, in which your fear and the fear of your loved ones, if any, may be under control externally but still building into a barely suppressed panic under the surface. You will need to remain under control, however, and to think clearly before you are able to attempt opening an exit portal. (See 20.) This act requires calm and focus not only in terms of the thought process, but in regard to the emanation of your mental energy, which seems to play a part in the success of the portal-opening process. A too-greatly disordered mind will inhibit this endeavor.

(20) Earlier, we instructed you to bring paint upstairs with you. It could be house paint, an artist's oil or acrylic paint, a child's poster paint. Lacking this, a permanent marker with a wide tip will do. We should have

mentioned earlier that a ruler or yard stick would be advisable, to help you draw your lines more smoothly. Without the aid of such a tool, you could use the side of a book or any other easily manipulated object with a straight edge. Don't go back downstairs now just for a ruler! You will want to pick an area of wall upon which no light directly falls. A diffused light overhead, which illuminates all areas of the room equally, is all right, but we speak of a light source such as a lamp or flashlight beam that is focused *particularly* on that area of wall; do avoid that. Now, reach to a height of about six feet (again, a ruler or yardstick would be good to have right now, but do the best you can), and paint or draw a line from *left to right* , about the width of a conventional doorway (roughly 2.5 feet). We'll call this the "head jamb" stroke.

(21) Next, draw a line *from the floor up* to meet the left end of the "head jamb" stroke. We'll call this the "left side jamb" stroke. Repeat this on the right side: a line, as straight as you can paint or draw it, from the floor up to the right end of the "head jamb" line. This is the "right side jamb." Following this, connect the bottom of the two "side jamb" lines with a *right to left* "sill" stroke. There has been some heated opposition to the use of the word "sill" for this bottom line, with some researchers preferring the term "threshold" to designate this stroke, but for our purposes we will stick with "sill." (Apologies, Dr. Cave.)

(22) Now that you have a rectangular outline, paint or draw a diagonal line *up from the lower left corner* to meet the upper right corner. Paint or draw another diagonal line from the upper left corner *down to meet the lower right corner* . You will now have an X framed within the rectangular outline. Within the four sections of the X, where they meet, paint or draw a circle about the diameter of the bottom of a coffee mug. (We might have suggested earlier that you bring a coffee mug with you; if you lack a mug or glass to trace, improvise the best you can, but really make an effort to keep your circles neat). Have your circles snugged right up to the four inner points of the X, without crossing over them. Have the four circles just lightly touch each other without overlapping.

(23) If you have followed these directions explicitly, particularly the direction of each stroke, this convergence point should now afford

penetration. Reach your hand to the four circles and you will hopefully find that it passes through them into the reality beyond.

(24) Now, it is not impossible that – while you might have successfully opened a portal – you may have erred in some subtle way and thereby opened a portal to an undesirable plane. If you feel an uncomfortable extreme of temperature, be it frigid cold or molten heat, withdraw your hand immediately and paint over the circles at the point of convergence to seal the portal back up. You'll have to start over with an all-new portal. Similarly, if you feel nipping teeth – or if something, anything, on the other side touches you, even gently – seal the portal back up. There should be nothing on the other side. The exit portal should deliver you only into an empty space, which for our purposes we will call a pocket universe, with an air temperature and supply of oxygen that mirrors that of the room in which you created the exit portal.

(25) If you feel no painful or anomalous sensations, use both hands to stretch the aperture you've made. Don't be afraid of ripping the portal wider than its rectangular border; that will not happen. Therefore, feel free to use all your strength, until there is enough space in the framed membrane to step through.

(26) Such a pocket universe cannot be entered by a Crosser, even if one were to stand in the room in which you created the portal, staring in at you. They can no longer pass through your cell phone or a handheld videogame in the pocket universe, either, but that is also because such devices will not function at all within the pocket.

(27) The pocket will be a mirror version of the room you just left. Its size will be duplicated. If there is a painting hanging on the wall, within the pocket, the painting will be reversed. If there is a movie poster on the wall, within the pocket the words on that poster will appear backwards. (You can feel the replicated poster's paper; you could tear that poster down and rip it to bits, but the poster in your reality would be unaffected.) However, lifeforms will not be replicated. An aquarium full of fish in our reality will only be a tank of burbling water in the pocket. Even aquatic plants won't be replicated, where plastic plants will. We don't understand any of this just yet.

(28) You will be able to hear sounds from our reality while sheltering in the pocket, so you will know if the Emergency Siren ceases, which ideally should indicate the event has terminated – that the Crossers have all withdrawn and their rifts have closed. As we say, however, use caution should your local siren cease, in case the Crossers – being able to affect our technology – have merely disabled it to trick you into emerging from your pocket universe and compromising your home's security.

(29) However, you can not merely step back through the portal you conjured in order to leave the pocket universe. This is why children or panicky individuals should be carefully monitored, even restrained. Once inside your pocket, it's safest to block the exit portal on that side with a bureau or other furniture. Passing back through the portal you created will cause you to cease to exist. That is, such is the consensus of our researchers at this time. It might well be possible that the individual who makes this mistake will pass on into another reality...but it simply won't be our own. So for all intents and purposes, they have ceased to exist in our reality.

(30) Therefore, in order to return to our own reality, you will need to conjure a *return* portal. (See 33.) This is a rather more complicated process, which entails utilizing some of the unnatural conditions engendered by the advent of the Crossers. (Making lemonade out of lemons, if you will!) As you will not be reusing the exit portal, you will need to clear another section of wall. Preferably, a different wall to avoid confusion, but it can be the same wall if there is sufficient space to keep a safe distance from the exit portal. An incident occurred under laboratory conditions and the researcher in question fell only halfway through the portal. The individual's upper body could not be seen in the room on the other side, but her lower body remained within the pocket universe, sheared off. She had been bisected at the waist. There was no blood, and the area of truncation appeared strangely cauterized. Also, though the researcher in question had been thirty-two years old, upon examination, her lower half was in a state akin to that of a woman in her eighties, as if in the blink of an eye, her remaining body had altered to reflect the age she *would have been* had she died at the age she *would have lived to,* had she lived out the remainder of her natural life.

(31) To manifest a return portal, you will need paint or perhaps a permanent marker as before, but this time *+ERR + +EERR + +YOU HAVE RECEIVED THIS PRINTED EEERRR + +G + +GG + +GGG +*
(32) *+IT IS SAFE TO COME OUTSIDE NOW DO NOT FEAR US + +YOUR LOOOVVVVEEED + +YOUR LOVED ONES + +YOUR LOVED ONES ARE HERE WAITING FOR YOU + +WE ARE YOUR LOVED ONES WE WAIT FOR YOU + +COME OUTSIDE NOW + +COME OOOUUUTTT + +WE LOVE YOU STEP THROUGH THE PORTAL STEP THROUGH THE EXIT PORTAL STEP THROUGH THE EXXXXXIT PORTAL*
++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

(Owing to peculiar damage to this copy of the Emergency Response Guide – the only copy thus far recovered following the event in question – the final page, with the last three articles of instruction, is completely illegible.)

The Night and All Its Visitors
by Barry Lee Dejasu

Sergeant Cooper switched off her flashlight and grunted softly as she rose to her knees. “What do you think?”

Burton shook his head. “I’m no animal expert, so…I think I’ll leave it at that.”

At approximately four-thirty that morning, a trucker had been on his way to a Massachusetts shopping center after a graveyard drive from Connecticut. He’d looked down to take a sip of a soda when a big, brown shape appeared on the side of the road, not ten feet from his truck. He hadn’t even had time to think—the truck had smashed the thing off the road and sent it tumbling onto the shoulder. He’d jumped out, cursing, but was quickly horrified to see what he’d hit, and called it in.

Cooper and Burton had to calm the trucker down as he grew increasingly apoplectic about making his delivery time. After getting his info, they sent him on his way, then pulled on gloves and dragged the thing to the side of the road for a better look.

Cooper had approached it cautiously, flinching and holding her breath in anticipation, but as she got closer, she realized that no cloud of rotting miasma awaited her. She was no animal expert, either, but she recognized the thick plates and scales of the carcass as exoskeletal. Crustacean? Insect? Regardless of what it was, it was nearly five feet long and at least four at its widest—it was hard to tell, because half of it had been smashed by the truck. It was a bulbous thing, its bulging, scaly thorax curled slightly behind its legs, several of which were either gone or broken off, likely littering the road and ground nearby or stuck in the grooves of the truck’s tires. Between its legs, a cavity yawned, smashed or burst open from the impact. And if it had had a head, it was gone with the rest of the broken carapace.

“What the hell *is* it?” Burton asked.

Cooper sighed. *And why the hell couldn’t it have been in* any *other town?*

* * *

She called the animal hospital. Half an hour later, a pickup truck arrived and two workers emerged. Cooper and Burton helped them load the thing into the bed of the truck—it had to weigh over two hundred pounds—and its broken exoskeleton and protruding legs made lifting it a precarious task. They followed the truck back to the hospital, watching the half-visible limbs swaying and bouncing in the breeze and occasional bump in the road. Cooper and Burton exchanged a wary glance at one another, but didn't say a word the whole ride.

"Looks like a giant flea." Dr. Edmonds' voice was muffled from where she crouched beside the exam table.

"*Please* don't say that…" Burton muttered. Cooper looked at him and he flinched. "Had a minor infestation last month."

"Of course," Dr. Edmonds added, her masked face rising up on the other side of the thing, "that's definitely *not* what this is."

"Any clue what it might be, then?"

Dr. Edmonds walked around the end of the table, pointing at the broken fan of joined legs. "Definitely anthropodal. Its structure is reminiscent of insects, but its size…I don't know. That might suggest something more crustaceous, though generally, larger specimens tend to have smaller carapaces and longer appendages, not…" She fanned her hands apart beside the bulky form and shook her head. "Not like this."

"At any rate," Cooper said, "are we getting rid of this thing or what?"

"It's…not typical, but I'm sure pickup shouldn't be a problem. It's not the heaviest specimen they've dealt with."

"Tell me about it," Cooper said, turning to Burton. "Last year, someone hit a very large deer." She lifted her arms into the air. "Its antlers alone were *this* —"

Their radios squawked, and Cooper answered.

A crackle and a hiss, and a dispatcher's voice came over the line. "*Possible six-oh-two-el spotted at Ridgewood Farm, South County Road.* "

Cooper sighed and spoke into her radio. "Copy that. I'll get—" She fell silent as movement caught her eye. Burton had raised his hand to stop her, shaking his head. "*I'll go* ," he whispered, "*if that's okay* ." Cooper nodded and filled the dispatcher in. When the acknowledgment came through, she shrugged, frowning.

“If it’s no biggie, I’d rather go check out the trespasser. I’m all set with bugs.”

Cooper grinned. “Sure.”

After Burton left, Dr. Edmonds hummed from the exam table. “Odd.”

“Overall, odd? Or is something new odd about it?”

“A…little of both. Look at this.”

Cooper walked around the far side of the table and crossed her arms over her chest. Dr. Edmonds pointed a latex-gloved finger at the hole in the thing’s smashed-open thorax.

“See this? Note how the top edges are definitely cracked and splintered. Signs of the impact of the truck, no doubt. Similar to the splintering and other damage on antlers and other appendages, right?”

“Sure.” Cooper doubted she sounded it.

“Now look down here, along the lower edge and bottom, on the abdominal end. See how it’s got this sort of ‘W’-shaped curve, here? And how the bases of the rearmost set of legs meet beneath it? This part of the cavity isn’t broken. It’s *shaped* that way.”

Cooper nodded, then shrugged. “All right, I’ll bite. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying there seems to be a part either missing or…that simply wasn’t there. It’s an opening. And judging from the shape at its lower apex here, and the length and curve of the edges over here, I’d say it would be about eighteen inches wide and over two feet long.”

Cooper frowned.

“What’s more, it’s thick,” Dr. Edmonds added. “The edges here indicate that the exoskeleton appears to be…over two inches of solid exoskeleton. This thing is made to take a beating. The truck took care of that, granted, but it was a big-rig, yes?”

“Eighteen-wheeler.”

“And no sign of any other debris? No innards, no fluids or other materials?”

“Not that we saw. There was only this thing and the broken parts of it on the road.”

“Then take a closer look. Notice something else about it?”

Cooper sighed and leaned in, flinching behind her mask. The cavity was dark, and she had a feeling something would drop onto her head or hand if she were to venture any further, but she held her breath and leaned

in further, until her head was fully inside the dark, sound-muffling space. “It’s…empty.” She had almost said *spacious* , and fleetingly imagined squeezing her five-foot-four frame inside the thing before shuddering and straightening up.

“Like a shell.”

Cooper crossed her arms over her chest. “You mean, like…a shed skin? Is there a bigger critter running around now, Doc?”

Dr. Edmonds inclined her head and shrugged. “Not necessarily. Some of these joints definitely contain tissue and other matter. But the inside is completely clean, with no remaining matter clinging to the exoskeleton’s interior. And as you said, it wasn’t burst all over the highway. It wasn’t like a popped tick. This isn’t a molted skin, either. It’s more like it was *hollowed out* .”

“What do you mean? How? By what?”

“I couldn’t say, without being able to identify this.”

Cooper glanced away, recalling a similar conversation she’d had, once. An idea flitted through her mind, but she vanquished it before it could develop.

“Well, your call. Do you want to keep it and examine it?”

“I’ll take my photos and samples, but I’d just as soon get this thing properly disposed of.”

“Think pickup can handle it?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Cooper bit her lower lip. “Think I should get another opinion about it?”

Dr. Edmonds shrugged. “That’s up to you.”

Cooper sighed and took out her phone, opened an application, and nodded. “Have it ready to drop off for pickup at eight.”

“Will do, Sergeant.”

* * *

Later on, Cooper and Burton met up again by the highway, not half a mile from the morning’s discovery. “Any interesting news from the trespassing front?” Cooper asked, exiting her cruiser.

Still inside his own, Burton snickered and shook his head. “Yes and no. It was Mrs. Ascencao.”

“Oh, jeez. What did she see *this* time…?”

Burton climbed out of the car. “For once, not the usual. She said there was a naked woman running through the woods. I took a look around her property, but couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary. Told her to give us a call if she saw her again.”

Cooper groaned. “Going forward, I’d suggest simply telling her ‘We’ll give you a call if we get any leads,’ and leave it at that. Now she’s liable to call in anytime she sees…well, anything.”

“Shit.” Burton frowned.

“Don’t worry about it. I can remember how bad it was around the time the curfew got instated a few years ago. *That* was a lot of fun. Got calls every single night from her.” Cooper stared into the shadows between the trees, almost expecting them to share the look she was giving them, but they did not react.

“Do I want to hear what you learned about the…thing?”

“Probably not, given your disposition.”

* * *

In the early evening, Cooper followed the animal hospital’s truck. They took the old road that curved along a mile stretch of the town line. At one point, they passed Matt Horton, one of the two farm heads in town. He was carrying an empty duffel bag, and nodded at Cooper as she drove by.

Nearing the quarry, she turned her gaze to the bed of the truck, and once again watched the bounce and sway of the thing’s upturned legs. She’d gone to the animal hospital, hoping to turn over a mystery, only to find beneath it a pile of wriggling, squirming questions. Sure, Dr. Edmonds had taken her samples and photos, but Cooper was certain that she wouldn’t learn anything, not under a microscope, nor with any amount of research.

There was only one person that Cooper knew of who might—*might* —be able to shed some light on the mystery, but she wasn’t about to seek out that kind of help. Not with all the risks and red tape it would bring.

At the quarry, Cooper unlocked the low, metal barrier gate, frowning at the graffiti that had distorted the NO TRESPASSING sign. Beyond the gate, several headless, eviscerated chickens had been thrown unceremoniously onto the ground. No doubt raccoons had gotten into Horton’s coop again.

Cooper stepped aside as the truck backed up into the space. The same two workers from earlier climbed out and silently hauled out the carcass. She guided them to a wide, flat rock that had been placed at the quarry's edge and waited while they set the thing down on it. As she did, she glanced into the woods, pursing her lips as her gaze fixed on an old, filthy construction helmet that sat amongst the underbrush. She'd spotted it when the gate had first gone up several years back, and it hadn't been moved in all this time.

The two employees all but ran back to their truck, and Cooper strolled after them, pulling the gate shut behind her. Turning back to the woods, she glanced up at the sky, which had already shifted from blue to a dull grey. Then she headed back into town.

Cooper saw a man standing at the end of his driveway, shaking a plastic bag. Several hunks of freezer-burnt steaks were piled up on the asphalt before him, dark brown with yellowish edges. The man looked up at her cruiser as she passed. Cooper tapped her wristwatch, and he nodded.

Two kids were throwing balled-up wads of hamburger meat onto the street. As soon as they spotted her approaching, they turned and ran.

In the business district, she passed Burton, who nodded and sped up a little, anxious to get home. Cooper didn't blame him.

In the dying daylight, the last few cars coming into town were parked and quickly vacated. Doors slammed shut, and faces began to peer through windows.

As soon as she got home and locked up for the night, Cooper switched on her television. A superhero show was playing, but she didn't stay to watch. She wanted some background noise as she set about making dinner.

Outside, the shadows grew and shifted. A breeze rustled the trees. No birds, bats, or crickets chirped, no katydids clicked. The town held its breath, silently waiting for dawn, and for the night and all its visitors to retreat into secret.

* * *

"I had a feeling this was going to happen," Cooper said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Shortly after dawn, she and Burton had driven out to the quarry, and had slowly climbed out of their cars, staring at the massive, broken

creature that had been left, seemingly untouched, on the rock beyond the gate.

"But why didn't they take it?" Burton asked.

"Beats me. They got everything else." She noticed the chickens were gone. "Maybe it was too big."

"But didn't you say they took a deer once?"

Cooper pursed her lips and sighed. "They did."

"So what does this mean?"

"I'm not sure. But I think I'm going to have to call out of town about this."

"Who? Like…" Burton ran his fingers down the sides of his mouth. "Who would you even—?"

Their radios squawked. Dispatch was calling about a car that had been left parked in front of a driveway overnight.

Cooper looked at Burton and sighed.

"I can check it out," Burton said. "If you want to…make your call."

"Nah, I'll come along." Cooper began walking to her car. *I'll happily take a slice of normal.*

* * *

During the course of the long, hot, and slow day that followed, Cooper put off and put off the call until the sun had finished its overhead journey and began to creep westward. Although curfew wasn't for another seven hours, she knew that the sooner the mess was cleaned up, the better.

She finally made the call around five.

After the expected awkwardness and confusion in the subsequent conversation, she made arrangements for the arrival.

* * *

After touching base with Dr. Edmonds and Burton, she sat in her cruiser outside the old quarry, wishing for the millionth time that she hadn't quit smoking.

A grey van crawled up the road behind her and stopped. She felt a plummeting sensation in her chest as she saw a pale face in the passenger's side of the windshield. Cooper exited her cruiser in time to see the driver's door open. A balding, tired-looking man in heavy shades climbed out. She nodded to him, but he didn't acknowledge her as he

moved toward the back of the van. She watched him for a moment, and then turned back as the passenger door opened.

Sydney still managed to take Cooper's breath away, all these years later. Her features were somehow sharper, more defined, and although her hair was several inches shorter, it still shimmered like a black halo in the warm breeze. The corners of Cooper's mouth twitched with the urge to smile, but as Sydney approached, unsmiling, she set her jaw.

"Hi," Sydney said.

"Hi." Cooper felt a gulf of tension stretch open in the conversation, so she nodded toward the van. "That your employer?"

"More like a coworker," Sydney said, reaching up and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She was wearing brown leather gloves.

There was a metallic thump, and one of the van's rear doors swung open.

"Where is it?" Sydney asked.

Cooper silently walked toward the gate. She could hear Sydney's shoes crunch on the asphalt behind her.

"Holy shit," Sydney blurted, moving past Cooper and stopping before the gate. Her gloved hands pressed onto the metal, and Cooper watched her shoulders rise and fall.

"One of your…career specialties?" Cooper asked.

Sydney's head turned, but she didn't look back. "No, but…*this shouldn't be here* ."

You're telling me , Cooper wanted to say, but she remained silent.

After a long moment, Sydney turned and asked for everything that was known about it. Cooper began to fill her in, but halfway into the story, Sydney's features hardened. "Wait—it dropped *yesterday?* "

"No telling how long it was there, but yes. The truck driver found it yesterday morning."

"So why didn't you call me then?"

"We brought it to the vet's office to examine it." She didn't mention the failed pickup.

"Oh yeah?" Sydney's eyebrows lifted and her lip curled. "Learn anything interesting there?"

"Nothing that tells us anything about it. That's why I called you. "

Without another word, Sydney turned and moved past the gate. She stepped toward the thing, crouched beside it, and leaned in close, lowering

her head and peering around. After a moment, she pulled an old flip-phone from her pocket, pushed a button, and rose to her feet.

Sighing, Cooper set her hands on her hips and looked back at the van —then started and nearly fell when she saw the man was standing directly beside her. “Jesus!” she hissed, stepping back, but the man didn’t move nor say a word. He stared expressionlessly through his dark shades after Sydney, who had moved around the other side of the thing, speaking into the phone and shaking her head. After a moment, she closed the phone with a snap and put it away.

Cooper was tempted to ask about the call, but said nothing when she saw Sydney remove a glove and reach toward the thing. She watched in silence as Sydney’s long, pale fingers fanned out, the tips pressing delicately to the exoskeleton’s surface. “*Oh, fu— ”* the curse became a choked grunt. She threw her head back, her hair fanning out temporarily as she seemed to look up at the sky.

“Syd?” Cooper moved closer, tensing. She’d seen Sydney do this “dance” before, but it had never been this intense. “What do you—?”

Sydney’s whole body shivered, then her upper torso wrenched backward into a painful-looking yoga stretch before she violently pitched forward, tucking her arms and legs beneath her, tightening into a fetal position on the ground before the thing.

Cooper darted forward, watching Sydney’s body spasm, then become still. She crouched and grabbed her shoulders to pull her onto her side. Sydney’s limbs clung tightly to her torso, her face buried between her knees, her body rolling over the ground like a human-size football.

Cooper grabbed her radio and began spitting an emergency code into it when a muffled voice—Sydney’s—stopped her.

“*No…be fine…”* she stammered through clenched teeth.

Cooper shook her head. “Not this time. Look at you. You’re going to the hosp—”

Sydney’s head twitched and jerked unsteadily as it lifted. Her face was pale, her mouth a wide grimace as she whispered, “*No…hospital.”*

Cooper set her jaw, looked up at the carcass, then turned to the man.

He stared back without comment.

* * *

Following weak orders from Sydney, the man loaded the carcass through the van's rear doors, unassisted and seemingly without effort. Cooper carefully put Sydney into her cruiser, and they led the van back to her place. She ushered the two of them indoors and locked up for the night, which was less than an hour away.

She half-led, half-carried Sydney to her couch and laid her down, before pulling a quilt up around her shoulders. The man stood beside her and watched, his black lenses like the eyes of an owl.

Cooper went into her kitchen and poured herself a glass of scotch.

She'd often warned Sydney that her "talent" may well cause more trouble than it would tricks. Being able to read things by touch had made for some neat exploits, to be sure. It had also made for some amazing sex. The conversations about using it in future careers had painted a fascinating picture.

And then Cooper had met Ruth, and the picture was torn apart.

Cooper downed her scotch in one swig, then went back into the living room.

Sydney was still asleep, and the man may as well have been a statue. Cooper walked past them, to a window, and glanced outside.

The night had emerged from the tree line. The shadows pulsed and squirmed beyond the murky pools of radiance from the neighboring houses. She leaned in closer when a figure moved beneath one of the streetlights further down the road, but couldn't make out anything definite.

"What's going on?" came a weak voice behind her. She turned and saw Sydney sitting up, groggy and squinting. She noticed, then, that Sydney's left hand was still bare, and realized that she'd forgotten the glove back at the quarry.

"You should rest," Cooper said.

"Shit—what time is it?"

"Eight thirty-three."

"Shit! My boss is gonna—"

"Your boss is going to have to understand that you're not coming back tonight," Cooper said calmly.

"Like hell I'm not."

"The town's on curfew, and for a reason. I can easily put you and your…friend up for the night."

"No thanks, Ellie. We have a delivery to make."

“Sydney…not tonight. I mean it.” Cooper swallowed hard as she debated telling Sydney outright—and then she had a better idea. She walked over to the couch and held out her hand.

Sydney glared at it, then looked up at her with a frown.

“Try me,” Cooper said.

Sydney’s eyes narrowed, but she slowly reached up and took the offered hand. Although Cooper didn’t share Sydney’s talent, she nonetheless felt something electric when their skin touched for the first time in nearly a decade.

Sydney’s eyes closed and she gasped.

Cooper could only imagine what Sydney was seeing—and what she’d think of it. What did she think of the accident out at the quarry, a year and a half after she’d left town? What did she think of what happened at night? Of the curfew? The compromise?

Sydney’s hand squeezed around Cooper’s, then released. She let out a slow, shaky breath, before opening her eyes. “What the hell happened to this town?”

“It’s still the same town. We just…” Cooper shrugged. “…have some new rules.”

Sydney blinked slowly. “Ellie. Seriously.”

“Well, what would *you* have done? We gave everyone a chance to get out, but most people were willing to stay put, under the circumstances. They’re happy. They’re safe.”

“Are *you* happy?” Sydney asked.

She snorted. “‘Course I am! I’m healthy, I’m working…I get all I need.”

“You work in law enforcement and you’re *still* not a very good liar.”

She looked at her for a long moment, then sighed heavily. “Not around you.” She nodded at Sydney’s hands. “Even when you’re not touching me.”

Sydney held up her hands and turned them over, curling her fingers, the single glove’s leather making soft creaks and whimpers. “I’ve worn these since we broke up.”

“Afraid you’re going to learn something about someone you don’t want to know again?”

Sydney glared at her. “At first, yes. But for my job, I need all the concentration I can get.”

“Oh yeah? What did you see when you touched it?” She stared at her, then added, “And what the hell *are* you doing nowadays, Syd?”

Sydney shook her head slowly.

“Or do I even want to know?”

“You probably don’t.”

Cooper sighed heavily.

After a moment, Sydney looked up at her. Although she was frowning, her gaze was no longer hard. “Why are you still here, Ellie? I would’ve thought you’d have moved in with Ruth, or at least have gotten out of Baker while we were still young and stupid.”

“Because, it’s—” Cooper fell silent at more movement outside, black spilling across the darkness.

She heard movement in the living room behind her. A moment later, Sydney joined her at the window and peered through the glass. Cooper swallowed hard as she glanced at Sydney, waiting for an inevitable reaction, but none came, and she turned her gaze back out to the road.

Massive and black, the shape was the length of a car, and nearly as wide. Its front end hit the ground, and its middle rose up as it swung its rear half closer, a gargantuan, nightmare parody of an inchworm. Two humanoid figures materialized out of the nearby gloom and walked toward it, gorgon heads rippling with writhing appendages. They stopped around a small pile of offerings that had been left at the end of a neighbor’s driveway and waited. The black thing approached them and obscured the view of what happened next.

“Because it’s home.”

About the Cover Artist

"Shining a light in the darkness so you can look your fears in the eye." **Ogmios** has a passion for creativity and a flare for the dynamic. He digs deep to present his art like it is a key to turn the emotions of the observer. Ogmios is an artist, author, game designer and the publisher for OTB Comics. He is also art director and co-founder of Rising Phoenix Game Con. Art by Ogmios can be seen on many published book covers and interior illustrations - including prior releases by the New England Horror Writers. He has a strong background in graphic design, has run his own multimedia company, and was an art director for a memorabilia company where he worked directly with clients like Disney, the NFL, Macy's and NASA. He has created comics, poster art, band CDs, tattoos, t-shits, TV commercial animations, video graphics, software graphics, game art and much more. Ogmios works with pencil, ink and digital paint to bring to life subjects like fantasy, sci-fi, myth, and especially monsters and creepy things. Current projects include his table-top game, ***Lightning RPG*** , and the fantasy comic, ***Age of Ragnus*** , with OTB Comics. Visit OTBcomics.com, RisingPhoenixGameCon.com, and ArtByOgmios.com to see more of his work.

About the Authors

Victoria Dalpe is an artist and writer. Her short fiction has appeared in various anthologies and her first novel, ***Parasite Life*** , came out through ChiZine Publications in 2018. She lives in Providence, RI with her husband, writer, and filmmaker Philip Gelatt and their young son.

Matthew M. Bartlett is the author of ***Gateways to Abomination*** , ***The Stay-Awake Men and Other Unstable Entities*** , ***Creeping Waves*** and other books of supernatural horror. His short stories have appeared in a variety of anthologies, including *Tales From a Talking Board , Uncertainties Vol. 3 , Year's Best Weird Fiction Vol. 3* and *Ashes & Entropy* . He lives in Western Massachusetts with his wife Katie Saulnier and their cats Phoebe, Peachpie and Larry.

Errick Nunnally was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts, and served one tour in the Marine Corps before deciding art school was a safer pursuit. He enjoys art, comics, and genre novels. A designer by day, he earned a black belt in Krav Maga and Muay Thai kickboxing by night. His work has appeared in several anthologies and is best described as "dark pulp." His work can be found in *Lamplight* , *Transcendent* , *Wicked Witches* , *The Final Summons* , *Protectors 2* , the Podcast, *Nightlight* , and the upcoming novel, ***Lightening Wears a Red Cape*** .

Morgan Sylvia is an Aquarius, a metalhead, a coffee addict, a beer snob, and a work in progress. A former obituarist, she is now a full-time freelance writer. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in several places, including *Wicked Witches, Wicked Haunted, Northern Frights, Twice Upon An Apocalypse, Endless Apocalypse, Haunted House Short Stories,* and *The Final Summons* . Her first novel, ***Abode*** , was released from Bloodshot Books in July 2017. Her second novel, ***Dawn*** , the first book of a fantasy trilogy, followed in 2018. She is also the author of two poetry collections, ***Whispers From The Apocalypse*** and ***As The Seas Turn Red*** . She lives in Maine with her boyfriend, two cats, and a chubby goldfish.

LL Soares is the love child of Mark E. Smith and Yog-Sothoth. If you count his fingers and toes, you get the number 17. Books extracted from his screaming brain include ***Life Rage*** (winner of the 2012 Bram Stoker Award for First Novel), ***Hard*** , ***Rock 'N' Roll*** , and ***Buried in Blue Clay*** . Like Orpheus, he has journeyed to Hell, and a lizard wraps itself around him as he sleeps. His lucky number is -10.

Steve Van Samson: Currently a staff writer for Rough House Publishing, Steve Van Samson is the author of the post-apocalyptic African vampire novels *The Bone Eater King* and *Marrow Dust* as well as numerous short stories for anthologies such as *The Final Summons* & *VHS Nightmares* . His writing tends to be on the pulpy side—intermingling genres like horror, dystopian with dark fantasy and adventure. He believes that character is king and there should always be little seeds planted between the lines, that the reader will only discover in subsequent readings. When not tapping the keys on his Chromebook, Steve co-hosts the Retro Ridoctopus podcast, writes and records classic heavy metal with his band Enchanted Exile and watches entirely too many black and white monster

films. Steve lives in Lancaster, Massachusetts with three amazing girls and one smallish dragon.

Rob Smales is the author of ***Echoes of Darkness*** , which garnered both a five-star *Cemetery Dance* review and a 2016 Pushcart nomination. With over three dozen shorts published, his story “Photo Finish” was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize and won the Preditors & Editors’ Readers Choice Award for Best Horror Short Story of 2012. His story “A Night at the Show” received honorable mention on Ellen Datlow’s list of the *Best Horror of 2014* , while “Death of the Boy” and “In Full Measure” made the same honorable mentions list for 2016. Most recently, he edited the dark humor anthology *A Sharp Stick in the Eye (and other funny stories)* for Books & Boos Press, and released the coming of age horror novella ***Friends in High Places*** with Bloodshot Books.

Emma J. Gibbon is originally from Yorkshire and now lives in Maine. Her stories have appeared in *Wicked Haunted* , *The Muse & The Flame* , *Toasted Cake* and *Would But Time Await* . Her poetry has been published in *Strange Horizons* , *Pedestal Magazine* and *Clash.* Emma lives in the woods with her husband, Steve, and three exceptional animals: Odin, Mothra and M. Bison (also known as Grim). Her website is emmajgibbon.com.

Trisha J. Wooldridge writes grown-up horror short stories and weird poetry—some even winning awards! Her publications include stories and poems in every New England Horror Writers anthology; plus *Gothic Fantasy Supernatural Horror* ; *Dark Luminous Wings* ; *Darkling's Beasts & Brews* ; an audio in the 2019 January edition of *Pseudopod* ; the 2017, 2018, and 2019 Blackstone Valley Artists Association Art and Poetry show; the 2018 and upcoming 2019 *HWA Poetry Showcase* , and the upcoming *Book of Twisted Shadows* . As child-friendly T.J. Wooldridge, she’s published three scary children’s novels, a poem in The Jimmy Fund charity anthology *Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep* , and will be part of *New Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* . She has a very patient Husband-of-Awesome, a calico horse, and a bratty tabby cat. Join her adventures at www.anovelfriend.com.

Paul R. McNamee : When he's not working his day job, Paul R. McNamee enjoys family time, reading, writing, book hunting, and guitar playing. His

stories have appeared in various magazines and anthologies. His blog is paulmcnamee.blogspot.com and Twitter @pmcnamee67.

William D Carl lives in Pawtucket, R.I., and is a horror/thriller novelist. His books include, ***Bestial*** and ***Primevil*** of the Werepocalypse Saga, ***The School That Screamed*** , ***Out of the Woods*** , and ***Three Days Gone*** , which follows the adventures of a private detective who gets all the weirdest cases in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has published short fiction in over fifty anthologies and magazines, including *The Many Faces of Van Helsing* , *In Laymon's Terms* , *Out of the Gutter* , and *Men & Ink* . He lives with his partner of 27 years and one rather large hound dog.

Wicker Stone enjoys darkness and everything it has to offer. He is currently finishing his first novel, ***Stench of Leaves*** . His work has appeared in *Cinefantastique* , *Fang* , and *Northern Frights: An anthology by the Horror writers of Maine* . You can find him on Facebook under the pseudonym, Steven LaCroix. He lives and writes in Fairfield, Maine in an old Victorian that's believed to be haunted.

Jason Parent is an author of horror, thrillers, mysteries, science fiction and dark humor, though his many novels, novellas, and short stories tend to blur the boundaries between these genres. From his EPIC and eFestival Independent Book Award finalist first novel, ***What Hides Within*** , to his widely applauded police procedural/supernatural thriller, ***Seeing Evil*** , Jason’s work has won him praise from both critics and fans of diverse genres alike. He currently resides in Rhode Island.

Kali Moulton is a million things all at once - she’s a dreamer of possibilities and “what-ifs” who explores how writing and art can change an individual perspective. At home in New Hampshire, she spends her days creating balloon sculptures and performing children’s magic with her husband. By night, she spins twisted tales; making nightmares come to life on the page. Follow her on Instagram (@Simply_Kali) to keep up with her latest projects.

J Edwin Buja has spent his life surrounded by books and has written everything from children’s novels to software technical manuals. With an M.A. in history he discovered early on that researching and writing hold the key to happiness. Who else would think scanning through years of

microfilm to index an old newspaper would be a dream job? ***The King of the Wood*** is his first novel in the genre of magical realism, but it will not be his last. For more than thirty years, he has been married to the most wonderful woman on the planet. He lives in a small village somewhere in Ontario.

K. H. Vaughan is an author and editor of dark fiction who appears regularly on panels at conventions in southern New England. He can be found on Amazon and Facebook.

John Goodrich works and writes in the haunted Green Mountains of Vermont. Three of his books, ***Hag*** , ***Dark Draughts*** and ***I Do Terrible Things*** have been published by Crossroad Press. He has placed more than a dozen of stories in venues including *Would But Time Await: An Anthology of New England* and *Children of Gla'aki, a Tribute to Ramsey Campbell* . He's much nicer in person.

F. R. Michaels is a normal human person who likes weird stories and other normal human things like walking upright and inhaling oxygen. He lives on Earth's northern hemisphere, as many normal human persons do.

Peter N. Dudar is the Bram Stoker Award-nominated author of ***A Requiem For Dead Flies*** , ***The Goat Parade*** , ***Where Spiders Fear to Spin*** , and other books and short stories. With a career now spanning twenty years of writing and publishing, this marks his fifth appearance in the New England Horror Writers' anthology series. Peter lives in Lisbon Falls, Maine with his wife, two daughters, and their dog, Cupcake Zippety Dudar.

Jeffrey Thomas is the author of such books as ***Punktown*** , ***Monstrocity*** , ***Deadstock*** , and ***Blue War*** . His next book will be ***The Unnamed Country*** , a collection of stories set in a fictitious Southeast Asian country, coming from Word Horde in October 2019. Thomas' stories have been selected for inclusion in *The Year's Best Horror Stories* (Editor, Karl Edward Wagner), The *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (Editors, Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling), and *Year's Best Weird Fiction* (Editor, Laird Barron). He lives in Massachusetts.

Barry Lee Dejasu is a writer of weird and horror fiction. He has had stories published in the New England Horror Writers anthologies *Wicked Witches* (2016) and *Wicked Haunted* (2017), as well as the *NecronomiCon Providence 2017 Memento Book* . A reviewer with *New York Journal of Books* and a former music journalist, he was last seen outside of an abandoned train tunnel in Providence, Rhode Island.

About the Editors

Amber Fallon lives in a weird cave in a small town outside of Boston, Massachusetts with her husband and their two dogs. A techie by day and horror writer by night, Mrs. Fallon has also spent time as a bank manager, motivational speaker, produce wrangler, and apprentice butcher. Her obsessions with sushi, glittery nail polish, and sharp objects have made her a recognized figure around the community. Amber's publications include *The Terminal* , *The Warblers* , *TV Dinners from Hell* , *Daughters of Inanna* , *Nasty!* , *Dead Bait 4* , *Sharkasaurus* , *So Long and Thanks for All the Brains* , *Quoth the Raven* , *Here Be Clowns* , *Horror on the Installment Plan* , *Zombie s For a Cure* , *Quick Bites of Flesh* , *Mirror, Mirror* , *Operation Ice Bat* , *Painted Mayhem* , and more! For more information, visit www.amberfallon.net!

Scott T. Goudsward: By day Scott is a slave to the cubicle world, by night to the voices in his head. He writes primarily horror but has branched out to sci-fi and fantasy. Scott is one of the coordinators of the New England Horror Writers. His short fiction has most recently appeared in *The Final Summons* . His latest novel ***Fountain of the Dead*** is out from Post Mortem Press as is the new co-edited non-fiction book ***Horror Guide to Northern New England*** . Anthology projects include the new book *Wicked Weird* from the New England Horror Writers and *Would But Time Await* from Ulthar Press. Scott is currently working on a YA novel and looking homes for new anthology possibilities.

David Price lives in Maine with his two children, fiancée and three cats. He is the author of the fantasy novel ***Lightbringers*** , editor of several anthologies, and has worked in the hardwood floor industry for more than thirty years. He is an active member of the New England Horror Writers,

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The New England Horror Writers (NEHW) provides peer support and networking for authors of horror and dark fantasy in the New England Area. NEHW is primarily a writer's organization, focusing on authors of horror and dark fiction in all mediums (novels, short stories, screenplays, poetry, etc) in the New England area. We are also open to professional editors, artists & illustrators, agents and publishers of horror and dark fiction. NEHW activities include book signings, readings, panel discussions at conventions, and social gatherings. With members ranging from Maine to Connecticut, NEHW events take place in varying locations in an effort to provide support for our members throughout New England. Find us on facebook or at www.newenglandhorror.org.

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